



Photos: Courtesy, America's WETLAND Foundation

Thomas Dardar Jr., principal chief of the United Houma Nation, leads a tour of the newly-installed floating islands of grasses, which were planted off the Louisiana coast last month. The pallets holding the grasses were constructed from recycled PET bottles in an effort to build a "reef" of new wetlands. Dardar says he hopes the project helps protect nearby communities from being washed away.

Residents hope recycled PET helps save La. shore

By Vince Bond Jr.
WRN reporter

Almost every hour, the Louisiana coastline loses a football field-sized piece of land.

And with it goes the region's first line of defense against flooding and stability in the seafood, oil and gas industries, said Val Marmillion, managing director of America's WETLAND Foundation in Louisiana.

To give the wetlands a boost last month, the foundation teamed with numerous organizations, including the Coastal Conservation Association, Martin Ecosystems and oil company Shell to place 187 "floating islands," made of recycled PET plastic bottles, in shallow waters along Isle De Jean Charles, La. The islands are filled with native plants in an attempt to build an off-shore "reef" of new wetlands.

Marmillion said it's important to "stimulate inventive ideas by small entrepreneurs" to see if restoration efforts can be effective in small, targeted projects like this one.

"People are migrating northward. It doesn't take a storm for tides to rise," he said. "The region is living in a disaster economy – Gustav, Ike, [Katrina]. The region has been so damaged. We've got our hands full as far as raising public awareness and its impact nationally."

If all goes according to plan, the grasses from the floating islands will take root to the earth below, serving as an anchor. In turn, the islands will trap sediment from the flowing water to form land.

Baton Rouge-based Martin Ecosystems developed the islands, which are 5-foot-by-8-foot pallets of recycled PET with a Brillo pad-like texture. The company, members of local Indian tribes and children placed the structures in the water.

Two saltwater plants, smooth cordgrass and seashore paspalum, were planted into holes on the islands and secured with peat, said Nicole Waguespack, co-owner of Martin Ecosystems.

The islands are connected with a stainless steel cable and solidified by anchors that are driven into the soil 15 to 18 feet deep until reaching clay.

Establishing wetlands will ensure



Local children unload recycled PET pallets which hold the grasses volunteers planted to help protect the Louisiana coastline.

that commercial centers like New Orleans don't take the brunt of severe weather, Waguespack said.

She said generations of families have lived near wetlands and made a living in the coastal economy.

"As we lose more and more, what's next? New Orleans?" Waguespack said. "The next line of defense is going to be New Orleans."

Thomas Dardar Jr., principal chief of the 17,000-member United Houma Nation that resides in six parishes along the coast, said water has been "a way of life" for his people for centuries.

In about 2003, he said, the Army Corps of Engineers told Isle De Jean Charles residents that they would have to move eventually because their land was outside of the protection zone of the Morganza-to-the-Gulf of Mexico levee system that's under construction.

Dardar said his people are aware of the dangers of living near the coastline, but they aren't going to abandon their land.

"It's our people, our heritage, our way of life. We've been living here for many centuries," Dardar said. "It identifies who we are. ... To native people, the land is sacred."

Dardar said he's optimistic about the islands and thankful that organizations invested resources to help alleviate the land loss.

"Time will tell if it's going to work," Dardar said. "Agencies looked at it and

deemed our community worth saving. They put time, effort and money into experimental work. If it does work, it can grow from there. You know what? At least it's a beginning. It gives us a little hope and encouragement."

The island project, which consisted of four sites and more than 1,500 total feet, was the largest undertaking by Martin Ecosystems.

It will take about a year for the grasses to take root in the 3-foot waters; the group will monitor progress on the project for the next year.

Waguespack said the islands were a success at Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge in New Orleans, the largest urban wildlife refuge in the U.S., after being installed two years ago.

"We've seen plants jump off and start to grow around the islands," she said.

Marmillion said the coast has been starved of sediment by the levee system on the Mississippi River. So far this year, the coastline has lost 30 million square yards, he said.

"Louisiana is experiencing the greatest loss of land on the planet," Marmillion said. "As the land deteriorates, saltwater intrusion eats up the grasses. ... It's actually a very serious problem. The country hasn't seemed to make it a priority. It's a huge economic and environmental issue." ■

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Surviving the dark alleys of Chicago

My days as a driver used to begin when the alarm went off at 2:10 a.m. I'd jump out of bed, get dressed and head out the door with a jug of ice tea or hot coffee in hand.

Most of the year it was simply jeans, T-shirt, work boots and a baseball cap. When late fall came, I might grab a long-sleeve shirt. It was never until the snow began to fall that I would wear a vest.

I'd jump in the old pickup truck and head for the shop. As a manager, I opened every day. By 3 a.m., I'd start my route. I had a commercial route that took three to four hours; then I hit the residential streets.

I loved every minute of it. I knew all of the night owls. I knew my competitors and we would acknowledge one another as we maneuvered our huge vehicles around with ease, in and out of the alleys. We didn't have back-up alarms in those days so we were a little stealthier. The cab over chassis with 25-yard Leach 2R bodies resembled huge grasshoppers taking over Chicago in the early morning fog.

The streets were alive with these monster trucks, a few squad cars, newspaper delivery vans, bums scavenging for aluminum cans and last-call hookers. We had to work fast before the alleys got crowded with the daily delivery trucks.

You never knew what you might stumble upon in the dark alleys. I had containers in impassable alleys. So I would have to push them out to the street. Since the street people knew a vehicle couldn't get down in there, it was a safer place to curl up. It was also comfortable and mostly dry during bad weather. A carpet store would toss its remnants into the alley along with the plastic roll covers. Ah! It was the best of both worlds for the bums ... warm and dry.

I can't tell you how many times I got the life scared out of me when grabbing a carpet roll or hunk of plastic and some bum would let out a yell, or if the weather was extremely bad, flipping open a lid only to find a drunken face leering up at you: "Hey buddy, you gotta smoke?"

Now, not everyone likes the garbage man. Granted, I get it when the hydraulic line let go and rained oil all over your driveway and/or vehicle. I get it when I cycled the hopper, and all that juice squished out on your sidewalk. I was even a little sympathetic the day my airbrakes locked up the Maxi in the new bank's parking lot ... 20 minutes before the grand opening. It made for a great photo in the Daily Herald of Arlington Heights, Ill.

Have you ever worked a "take all" contract? "Take all" means exactly that. I can't tell you how many times summer would bring 25-50-75 bags of grass at the curb. Yeah, at one house! Then in the fall, the leaves were never ending! Yes, we took tires, too. How many of you guys can recall 6-yarders filled with shingles? What were we thinking? We loaded refrigerators, freezers, stoves, water heaters, furnaces, bumpers, bicycles, lumber, drywall and whatever else into our rear-load packers. Back in the day, a trip to the landfill could be really interesting. Let me tell you, buddy, before the advent of Subtitle D regulation, essentially all we did was dig a hole and bury the garbage. End of story! There was no such thing as a nice little transfer station with a concrete floor. The guys that ran our landfills back then were absolutely *not* road builders. If it rained, you got dragged in and dragged out. It could really be a challenge and scary. If you were dumping up on top, the roads were slick. In the winter they were icy. I can't tell you how many times I slid downhill on slick clay.

Then there were the operators up on the working face that would try to stack trucks on top of each other, side by side with no more than walking space in between. I had an idiot on a dozer turn over right next to me just before I exited. Thank goodness I had the presence of mind not to get out of the truck to loosen my turn buckles until he passed. It could be a dangerous place.

Somehow, most of us survived. ■



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