Coastal Crisis Through the Lens of Community

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As part of an upper-level history course, students from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette gathered oral histories from coastal community members to gather their insights about the impacts of coastal restoration. Participants offered accounts of their experiences with erosion and restoration, an element often overlooked by the Coastal Master Plan. We visited coastal restoration sites with community members and coastal experts at the following locations to interview people about their understanding of restoration projects in existence for 5 or more years. Between January and March 2023, we traveled across the Louisiana Coast: Pontchartrain Biloix Project and Lake Lery, Mardi Gras Pass Project, Wax Lake, Sabine Refuge, Superior Canal, and Vermillion Bay. Below are the details of what we found at each site, and our recommendations for ways to better involve communities in restoration projects in the future.

Themes Noted in Interviews:
1. Enthusiasm- Coastal communities have emotional and impassioned responses to coastal land loss because of their cultural and personal connections to this environment.
2. Hurricanes as Benchmarks- People base their timeline of coastal erosion dependent upon their experiences with storms.
3. Where the Projects Are- Most projects are geographically isolated from the communities they benefit.
4. People- Lived experiences are people’s primary source of information on the topic of coastal restoration and erosion instead of formal education.

Takeaways From the Research:
1. The enthusiasm coastal communities display for their culture and lifestyle tied to the coast is an untapped resource.
2. Despite this, organizations often fail to communicate with the communities these projects effect, leaving those on the coast to base their knowledge of coastal change around their own personal experiences which are usually limited to major events like storms.
3. Participants directly expressed the desire for better education about coastal restoration projects, whether the project is newly constructed or in existence for several years, and recommended bringing community members to these sites for education.

Recommendations Based on Our Findings:
We recommend fostering the cultural connections that communities maintain with coastal environments, applying to restoration projects, and encouraging direct civic engagement with restoration sites.

This requires organizations involved in restoration efforts to develop deeper relationships and open dialogue with the communities they serve, expanding community perceptions beyond disaster recovery.

Ultimately, coastal communities want to be involved with restoration sites to understand the role these efforts play in the coastal ecosystem and better incorporate restoration organizations into the ebb and flow of coastal life.

Fig. 1: This graph accounts for the communities’ attitudes towards continued inhabitation on the coast. It is, the rationales to leave heavily outweigh those to stay, emphasizing the continued difficulties faced by residents of the region.

Fig. 2: This graph lists concerns from community members. Said concerns compound the coastal crisis in communities’ eyes.

References:
UL Lafayette Coastal Restoration History Survey Interviews, collected January-March 2023, at various sites.

Calcasieu-Sabine Basin Marsh Creation Project (Feb. 24)
A marsh creation site located on the Sabine Refuge and uses dredge materials. The purpose is to recreate a marshland that subsided from saltwater intrusion.

Wax Lake, Sabine Refuge, Superior Canal, and Vermillion Bay. Below are the details of what we found at each site, and our recommendations for ways to better involve communities in restoration projects in the future.

Mississippi Delta & Barataria Basin Project (Feb. 10)
The Mardi Gras Pass Project has been active for 10+ years and uses sediment deposition as its main force of combating the coastal crisis and building land in certain areas.

Pontchartrain Basin Biloix Marsh and South Lery Shoreline Protection Project (Feb. 3)
The Pontchartrain Biloix Marsh project is a shoreline protection project, while Lake Lery is engaging in marsh creation.

"I don’t think that the average Louisianian that lives on the coasts is super aware of the amount of projects going on, the cost of these projects, and if they are successful. They are not." [Community Member interviewed on Site]