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Cypress forests are a  
precious natural  
habitat and Louisiana's best defense against hurricanes. So why

# Mulch



# Madness

does the state allow loggers to turn the trees into wood chips?

by MICHAEL BEHAR photography by CHRISTOPHER LAMARCA

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EAN WILSON SLAMS forward the throttle on his 18-foot aluminum bateau—a flat-bottom skiff that he welded together himself—and catapults us downriver. It’s April and I’m in the Atchafalaya Basin, the nation’s largest swamp—1.4 million acres (roughly 10 times the size of Chicago) wedged between the

Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico in southern Louisiana.

Dressed in full camo and knee-high rubber boots, Wilson, 45, skims through a bayou only a couple of feet deep, and nearly pitches me overboard when he swerves left to avoid a hapless butterfly that’s fluttered into our path. A minute later he yells “Duck!” then cranks the wheel. We slide to the right, doing a NASCAR-style drift turn into a smaller canal. Sharp reeds and spiky underbrush scrape the hull; it sounds like a thousand swamp trolls clawing at our boat. Fearing decapitation, I wedge my head between my knees as overhanging branches graze my back.

Suddenly, Wilson kills the engine. The air is heavy and acrid, infused with the smell of organic decay. We drift silently into a cove ringed with cypress trees. Left to their own devices, these sturdy, 100-foot-tall giants live an average of 500 years but have been known to celebrate birthdays in the thousands. They reign over all life in the Atchafalaya, a stunningly diverse wetland that is home to at least 300 bird species. In addition, half of all migratory birds in North America—up to 2 million a day—use the Atchafalaya to nest, mate, or rest. The critter count also includes bobcats, foxes, alligators, minks, armadillos, coyotes, and otters, as well as endangered peregrine falcons, Louisiana black bears, and Florida panthers.

Since the mid-1980s, Wilson has been an unlikely addition to this menagerie. Born on a U.S. Air Force base in Torrejón, Spain, to a GI father and Spanish mother who soon divorced, he lived there until the age of 20, when he decided to volunteer with an environmental group dedicated to saving the Amazon. Before heading to Brazil, Wilson reckoned he should do a trial run somewhere a bit less hostile. “I needed to get used to the heat and mosquitoes.” He chose the Atchafalaya.

When he landed in the United States in 1983, Wilson couldn’t speak a word of English. His first stop was Belleville, Illinois, where his father lived. After a short stint working as a busboy for IHOP, he borrowed money to buy a red VW bus

that he named “Churrumbel” after a dinosaur in a Spanish comic book and headed for southern Louisiana. He bought a hammock, tent, bow and arrows, rubber boots, and a spear, then found a plot of dry land in the swamp to set up camp. Aside from a few fishing trips, he had no wilderness experience. “I stayed for four months by myself,” says Wilson. He dined on a smorgasbord of squirrels, frogs, crawfish, and whatever else he could catch. “I ate only what I hunted. Sometimes I had too much to eat; sometimes I didn’t have enough.”

The Amazon would have to wait. “I fell in love with the swamp and never left,” he says. He eked out a living as a commercial fisherman. By 1987, he’d leased a half-acre plot in Bayou Sorrel for \$150 a year, where he built a home propped three feet off the ground on cinder blocks—floodwaters lap at his doorstep at least once a year—and where he still lives with two dogs, two parrots, three horses, a pet snake, and a terrarium full of frogs, skinks, anoles, and newts.

Spending day after day in the swamp, Wilson began to notice a sudden surge in cypress logging about eight years ago. The practice devastates the Atchafalaya because cypress are the godfathers of the swamp, providing a fertile, protective sanctuary for wildlife. Without them, invasive plants quickly overrun indigenous species and strangle the ecosystem. “I realized that nobody was doing anything to protect the Atchafalaya,” he says. “I got fed up with it and started to do swamp tours to raise awareness.” One group that hired his Last Wilderness Tours told him about the Waterkeeper Alliance, Robert Kennedy Jr.’s grassroots nonprofit aimed at preserving waterways and wetlands. He sent in a proposal and in 2004 became the organization’s Atchafalaya Basinkeeper. “He is the eyes and ears of the Atchafalaya,” says Kennedy. “He’s also the voice and fist.”

Like a Great Wall rimming the coast, cypress forests in the Atchafalaya and elsewhere in Louisiana are the single best defense against hurricanes—magnitudes stronger, more enduring, and cheaper than any concrete or earthen levee. Their extensive root system spreads several hundred feet, weaving a tight lattice that serves as an anchor against high winds and storm surges. Hassan Mashriqui, a Louisiana State University professor of coastal engineering who creates computer simulations of hurricanes, told me that a stand of cypress just a football field in width can slash a town-leveling, 20-foot-high storm surge by 90 percent.

Which makes it all the more staggering that in recent years an entire industry intent on logging cypress has lawfully

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**If cypress logging continues apace, Louisiana’s strongest barrier between it and an angry sea will be gone in fewer than 20 years.**



Dean Wilson blends into the Atchafalaya swamp, an important breeding and resting stop for hundreds of migratory bird species.

sprung up. Some of the timber winds up as boards for home construction or furniture, but most trees are ground into garden mulch. That's right: The last natural stronghold that could stop hurricanes from obliterating southern Louisiana is

being pulverized into chips to adorn the very homes that the cypress would save from annihilation. According to the Louisiana Forestry Association, loggers are razing up to 20,000 acres of cypress every year. If the carnage continues apace, Louisiana's strongest barrier between it and an angry sea will be gone in fewer than two decades.

It's sick, it's twisted, it's totally insane, and that's why today Wilson regularly patrols rivers, lakes, and bayous in search of logging operations. He takes careful notes, snaps photos, and forwards the data to the local media, conservation groups, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Army Corps of Engineers, and Waterkeeper's headquarters in New York.

His efforts have infuriated loggers, mill operators, and timber-beholden politicians who say they provide desperately needed jobs to poor counties. Wilson has been threatened, warned to watch his back. A few days before my visit, he discovered Luna, his sprightly seven-year-old Samoyed-German shepherd mix, in a crumpled heap at the end of his gravel driveway. She was dead—intentionally poisoned, his vet later confirmed.

"Who do you think did it?" I ask Wilson early one morning as we bounce along a dusty back road in his double-cab pickup.

"I have many enemies. Could be anyone," he says, then quickly changes the subject. "Do you like the Alan Parsons Project?" he asks, fumbling for a CD wedged between the front seats.

Twenty minutes later we pull into Wilson's town of Bayou Sorrel, a loose smattering of ranch homes, single wides, and bait-and-tackle shops along the intercoastal waterway about 30 miles south of Baton Rouge in the heart of the Atchafalaya. "People here don't like outsiders," Wilson warns me. He should know. He showed up 24 years ago and a few locals still scorn him as "that

goddamn Mexican." "When I moved here they tried to run me out of town," he says in his often-indecipherable accent—a messy fusion of Spanish, Cajun, and Southern twangs. "They shot at me. They shot at my house. I got in fistfights."

Wilson gradually became friendly with most of his neighbors (except a cantankerous bunch who slept in derelict cars strewn around their yard). But today his activism is cultivating new foes. "It may sound dramatic," says Steve Fleischli, president of the Waterkeeper Alliance, "but Dean really does put himself at great physical risk to document what is happening down there."

**M**Y BELLY IS FULL of bullfrogs. It's my second day with Wilson in the Atchafalaya and we're at a remote bush camp whose owner, Rick Carline, prepares his usual Cajun feast for guests: 45 pounds of fresh crawfish and a mountain of panfried bullfrogs that he captured with his bare hands. "Dueling Banjos" plays in my head, but after sampling one I feel chagrined at being such a snob. Frogs should be immediately stricken from the list of biblical plagues—the Egyptians didn't know what they were missing.

The next morning, a chilly, faintly salty veil of fog has spread over the swamp. We set off in Wilson's boat before sunrise through mixed stands of cypress and tupelo. After 20 minutes we reach a placid clearing. But it's hardly quiet; the birds are going ape-shit. Migration is in full swing and it's standing room only for latecomers looking to roost in the treetops. Within two minutes, Wilson names off more tropical migratory birds than I saw during an entire eight-day trek through the Costa Rican jungle. "That's a yellow-crowned night heron," he says, pointing to a barrel-chested bird probing a shallow bog with its beak. "They're from South America but they come here to mate. There are 200 species of neotropical birds breeding around us right now."

The cypress rise proudly from the mist and form a shady canopy. The sunlight filtering through their feathery leaves casts an electric green glow over the swamp. "Hurricane Andrew came

right through here and you won't see a single cypress damaged by the storm," Wilson says. Like most cypress in the Atchafalaya, these are roughly 100 years old, mere teenagers; loggers hauled away the original old-growth trees during a 20-year timber rush that began at the turn of the last century.

Today's loggers maintain that the trees will grow back, just as they did before. "Mr. Basinkeeper says erroneous things because he's just a guide and doesn't have the background to understand," claims Janet Tompkins, who edits *Forests & People*, the quarterly of the Louisiana Forestry Association, a leading proponent of cypress logging. But wetland scientists, the Sierra Club, and the Audubon Society, as well as local representatives for the Army Corps of Engineers and the EPA, all concur with Wilson that the cypress don't stand a chance against logging.

The reason is that the swamp here sinks a few inches each year, a geological phenomenon called subsidence that occurs in all coastal wetlands. Historically, seasonal floods from the Mississippi River added silt to compensate for subsidence. But shipping canals and levees disrupt these regular deposits of fresh silt, and the swamp steadily collapses, allowing brackish water to flow inland from the Gulf of Mexico. The impact is deadly. "Cypress cannot tolerate high salinity levels and eventually they die," notes Wilson. The trees also require dry land to germinate—seedlings can't survive if submerged for more than 45 days. Most existing cypress in coastal Louisiana regenerated before saltwater incursion destroyed the natural conditions that once allowed a seedling to grow 30 feet in a decade. Cut down a cypress today and it's gone for good.

Of this there's little doubt. A few years ago, then-Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco commissioned 12 distinguished wetland experts to study the state's coastal cypress-tupelo forests. In April 2005, the Science Working Group, or SWG, published its findings. It valued timber in the swamps at \$3.3 billion, but it concluded that at least 80 percent of these forests will never return if logged. "In the spring you might see a blanket of little seedlings," says John Day, an ecology professor at Louisiana State University and SWG author. "But when the water comes up, it kills them."

To show me this firsthand, Wilson takes me to a recent

clearcut—a 1,000-acre swath of devastation concealed in the core of the swamp, impossible to see from the road, or even our boat. We have to hike over a berm and through a tangle of brush to reach it. The land is dry, between floods, and Wilson wanders through the stumps looking despondent. We count 20 three-inch seedlings sprouting from the sticky mud. Wilson reaches down and strokes one with his hand, gently caressing it like a wounded animal. "The loggers tell you these trees will grow back, but they never do." Seasonal floodwaters will soon drown the seedlings, and in their place will come invasive species such as willow, which can germinate in deeper, saltier water but are lousy habitats for wildlife and topple easily during storms.

After the 1920s, when loggers hacked down the last of the old growth, the timber industry more or less forgot about cypress. With levees newly in place, the Gulf of Mexico crept inland, and the second-generation cypress matured in shallow, brackish water. They grew tall but skinny, making them worthless for lumber—you might get one decent plank out of a whole log—so nobody bothered to cut them. That is, until a housing boom cranked up the demand for landscaping mulch. Between 2000 and 2004, new home construction in Louisiana soared by 56 percent. After hurricanes Katrina and Rita, home construction spiked another 26 percent; in addition to mulch surrounding new construction, homeowners replaced mountains of old mulch that were washed away.

Army Corps staffers—derided after Katrina and now expected to fortify the coast against future storms—are understandably frustrated with the free-for-all. "The state of Louisiana is asking for billions of dollars in federal tax money to restore coastal wetlands," says John Bruza, chief of surveillance and enforcement for the Army Corps of Engineers in Louisiana. "At the same time, it's allowing the cypress swamps to be clearcut and harvested."

To make matters more complicated, 90 percent of the Atchafalaya is private property, often held in families for generations. (King Charles III of Spain bequeathed Carline's great-great-grandfather his 200-acre plot in 1784.) Much of the swamp lies within St. Martin Parish, where annual income per capita barely tops \$13,000. No wonder that the \$1,500 to \$3,000 per acre

## Swamp Rats who abets the clearcutting of the last cypress stands?

### ● Department of Natural Resources

Under the 2005 Coastal Impact Assistance Program, the state DNR was given \$18.8 million to (mostly) buy cypress forests from private owners. To do so, the DNR was supposed to survey the swamps and designate areas most at risk. Three years later, it hasn't classified any land, or spent any of the money.

### ● Department of Agriculture and Forestry

The state agency has a vested interest in preserving the \$4.5 billion logging industry—Louisiana's second largest. Under recently retired Commissioner Bob Odom (listen to his personal jingle at [BobOdom.com](http://BobOdom.com)), the LDAF encouraged landowners to harvest their timber.

### ● Louisiana Forestry Association

A private lobbying group whose 4,000 members include landowners, foresters, wood suppliers, and loggers, the LFA insists that most cypress will grow back when logged. The head of the LFA, Buck Vandersteen, has been touring the country soliciting other pro-logging groups to pressure Wal-Mart to rescind its ban on Louisiana cypress mulch.

### ● Senator David Vitter

Before Katrina, Louisiana's Republican senator attempted to insert language into a \$2 billion water bill to prevent the Army Corps from enforcing already weak logging regulations in any but "navigable" waters.

### ● Former Representative Billy Tauzin

Although best known for his near-instantaneous transition from politician to Big Pharma lobbyist, Tauzin also used his position on the Energy and Commerce Committee to pressure the Army Corps to deregulate cypress logging.

### ● Louisiana's Congressional Delegation

The state's seven congressmen have taken a collective \$317,000 from the industry since 2000— $\frac{1}{3}$  of which has gone to Rep. Jim McCrery (R) alone. Along with senators Vitter (\$39,970) and Mary Landrieu (D; \$58,750), all of Louisiana's representatives signed a letter asking Wal-Mart to reconsider its cypress ban. —Casey Miner



the timber companies offer landowners is enticing.

And no wonder, too, that together with the timber industry—Louisiana’s second largest after oil and gas, and one of the state’s biggest employers—landowners have successfully blocked any regulatory reforms. Currently cypress logging is illegal only if it violates certain conditions stipulated in the federal Clean Water and Rivers and Harbors acts meant to protect navigable waterways and minimize pollution. The Corps and the EPA are charged with enforcing those laws. But the laws have been much weakened by the Bush administration, and the only full-time swamp cops are Bruza’s team of two and John Ettinger at the EPA.

“I’ll be honest with you: Enforcement is really tough, incredibly difficult,” says Ettinger. “It’s a huge coast with a vast amount of wetlands. You’ve got to be in a plane, or a boat going up and down the minor waterways. I’m the only EPA person doing wetlands in Louisiana. The rest of our team is in Dallas. Sure, I see logging trucks on the road with cypress. But it’s impossible to tell where

they came from. Some of it may be legal; some of it might not.”

“The problem is how fast it happens,” explains Wilson. “They can log a thousand acres in a week. By the time somebody sees the trucks coming out of an area and it gets reported, it’s too late.”

ONE EVENING, CARLINE SUGGESTS we take his two pirogues out from camp for a quick jaunt. A pirogue looks like a dugout canoe, only the gunnels ride about an inch from the waterline and it’s so tipsy you can capsize it by sneezing too hard. Carline has jury-rigged a four-horsepower lawn-mower engine to one and tows Wilson and me behind him in the second. We sputter into the swamp. A cold front has rolled in and gusty winds blast through the cypress. As darkness falls and we switch on our flashlights, scores of iridescent orange embers appear bobbing on the surface. Alligators. I yank my hands back [continued on page 98]

An aerial view of a clearcut within the Atchafalaya

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## mulch madness

[continued from page 81] from the gulleys.

The reptilian army encircling our pirogues is just one example of the flourishing wildlife in the Atchafalaya. Earlier we spotted kingfishers, owls, hawks, vultures, and just about every species of heron. Water moccasins slither quietly beside us. Nutria (giant South American swimming rats introduced in the 1930s for fur) breach the surface like tiny submarines prowling for food. Turtles scurry from muddy banks into the water, startled by our grumbling outboard engine. We discover a family of beavers dozing in its lodge, which is bigger than was my college dorm room.

It's hardly the most charismatic bunch of critters—and because so many creepy, crawly, and often dangerous creatures share the swamp with people who tend to be poor and powerless, it can be easy to dismiss its importance. Don't be fooled: The Atchafalaya is a rich and vital ecosystem. It's a playground for hunters, anglers, and wilderness connoisseurs—who in 2006 contributed \$2 billion a year to the state's economy.

But the cypress' most tangible value is as a surge protector. "If a community is protected by a cypress forest, you don't have to spend \$100 million to construct levees," says Barry Kohl, a geology professor at Tulane University in New Orleans and conservation chair of the Louisiana Audubon Society. "Long-term flood protection—that's worth a lot more than its value as lumber or mulch."

Until the vast network of canals and levees was built, a cypress buffer encircled New Orleans. But as the wetlands sank and saltwater seeped inland, the forests died off. "There were a few parts of New Orleans where levees were unaffected by Katrina," says Gary Shaffer, a biology professor at Southeastern Louisiana University and a coauthor on the SWG study. "Almost every single one of those areas had cypress in front of it."

In the report it issued four months before Katrina hit, the Science Working Group created a three-class system to categorize Louisiana's cypress-tupelo forests: Class I, swampland that can regenerate cypress naturally because of seasonal dry spells. Class II describes shallow areas that can sustain seedlings, if they are hand planted and tall enough to breach the waterline. In Class III, the cypress will not regenerate,

even if replanted, because deep, salty water persists year-round.

These categories have no force of law. Nevertheless Buck Vandersteen, executive director of the Louisiana Forestry Association, insists that "99 percent of cypress being harvested is Class I and II" and that the remaining 1 percent is salvage timber—downed trees blocking navigable waterways. He also said, "We planted 400,000 cypress trees last year alone." But Bruza at the Army Corps disputes this. "We've issued cease-and-desist orders [at illegal sites] and know of no cypress swamps that have been harvested and replanted," he says.

By the time a bag of mulch makes it to a retail store, it's likely passed through several different hands. Big mulch operations such as Corbitt Manufacturing, which produces the No-Float and Florida Gold brands, buy their logs from smaller producers, who in turn have agreements with landowners. Producers also don't always advertise the original source of their wood, instead printing out-of-state corporate addresses on mulch bags and letting people assume that's where the mulch came from. Wilson's campaign has helped convince Wal-Mart to cease buying or selling mulch known to be derived from Louisiana cypress, but it's unclear how the company can police such a policy. Lowe's says it has "implemented a moratorium" on cypress harvested between I-10 and I-12, an area that the company has deemed ecologically sensitive. But Lowe's, too, has no way to verify its suppliers are complying. At Home Depot, Ron Jarvis, the senior vice president of environmental innovation, says he's in discussions with the Rainforest Alliance and other groups to certify that the company's cypress comes exclusively from sustainably harvested forests. There's only one problem: The SWG report showed there are virtually none in coastal Louisiana.

Those scientists recommended Louisiana landowners be given incentives to preserve their cypress. A more radical option is a statewide ban on cypress logging. But you can be sure the timber industry will fight hard against any such provisions. "Placing a moratorium on buying cypress would totally devalue the land and put an entire industry out of business," argues Frank Vallot, who owns Louisiana State Cypress, a major mulch producer based

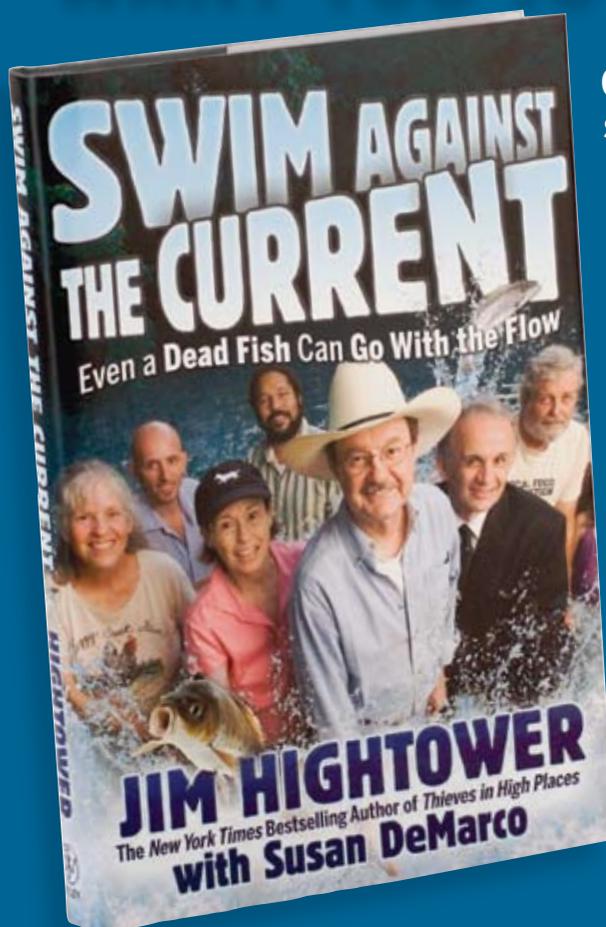
in Roseland. He adds that landowners would just sell to developers who'd drain the swamp. "Not cutting a tree is not going to fix anything. The trees will die anyway. The saltwater is killing them. I've talked to a bunch of scientists in the SWG and I agree with what they say, that if we don't change the way freshwater gets to the swamplands, we're not going to ever fix the problem."

Nobody I speak with disputes this fact. If the natural river delta were restored, "it would bring sediments and nutrients, push out the saltwater, and the swamp would grow again like it used to," says Shaffer. "With a reliable source of freshwater, you could have cypress seedlings that grow 30 feet tall in 10 years."

Yet even after a cypress dies from saltwater poisoning, its roots, trunk, and limbs can remain standing strong for up to 200 years, presenting a formidable barrier against storm surges. Wilson knows this, which is why he has no plans to retreat. "I might have 20 to 30 years left if the loggers don't kill me first," he declares. It's my last night in the Atchafalaya and I'm sipping Abita, a local ale, on Wilson's porch while he cooks up his secret crawfish recipe, a salty stew of Cajun spices, potatoes, frankfurters, lemons, and a pouch of disturbingly orange powder called Swamp Fire.

The next morning we meet a local pilot who's agreed to fly us over the swamp in search of clearcuts. Our single-engine Cessna climbs out of Baton Rouge, an urban island in the midst of a lush swampland. We head east and fly low, and after a few minutes are circling above Vallot's timber facility. Wilson hands me his binoculars. A mechanical loader is grabbing whole trees from a conveyor belt and feeding them into a mulcher, which spits the diced bits onto a giant mound. We veer south, toward the Gulf of Mexico. Between us and the sea is a dense blanket of seemingly impenetrable cypress, interrupted only by chocolate-tinged bayous that look like brown serpents slithering through an emerald ocean. Soon a square of scarred land appears—a massive clearcut. "That's a fresh one!" Wilson shouts over the engine drone. He asks me to log the coordinates into a handheld GPS so he can return later by boat. "They have no right in hell to cut those trees," he yells, "because if we lose the cypress, we will lose the whole swamp." On the distant horizon, the skyscrapers of New Orleans rise through the haze. ■

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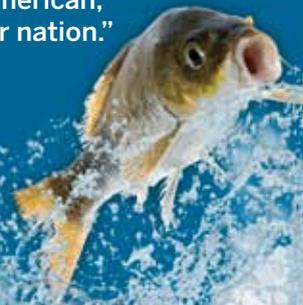
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