Collapse and Opportunity: Louisiana’s Environment at the Starting Line
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A fresh start for Louisiana. That was the theme of Governor-elect Jindal’s campaign. It clearly struck a chord with the public and has a nice ring to it, but what does it mean for Louisiana’s environment? Or more specifically, what does it mean for Louisiana’s stewardship of its environment?

These questions can’t be answered without first taking a look at Louisiana’s environmental resources and the history of how they have been used, managed, or mismanaged.

Louisiana was blessed with an environment rich in natural resources. Its waters, soils, mineral wealth, clean air, forests, fish and wildlife have driven our growth, provided wealth and shaped our culture. So abundant were those resources that it was easy to take them for granted. We drained, pumped, leveed, trapped, hunted, mined and harvested our natural resources in a concerted effort to “tame” our waters, “reclaim” land and extract wealth. The gains from this activity were stupendous but too often ephemeral or benefited those outside our state. The costs all too frequently were lasting and ours to bear.

Until very recently, these costs were chalked up to the price of progress. Until recently economic development and community growth were seen as paramount and even at odds with protecting air and water quality and with land use planning and wetland protection. To be sure we celebrated our Sportsman’s Paradise but when push came to shove channels like the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet looked like jobs, oil field waste pits and access canals looked like progress, polluted air was the “smell of money”, and lead paint in our schools and lead in our children was do-gooder hand wringing. Truth be told this was more a matter of our values and policies than the level of our knowledge. In 1928, Percy Viosca, Jr., one of our greatest conservationists and an employee of the Louisiana Department of Conservation, wrote that Louisiana’s reclamation and flood control efforts were “more or less a failure” and “killing the goose that laid the golden egg”. It wasn’t that we didn’t know the risks; we didn’t want to believe them or we made compromises, even if they made sense at the time, we must now own up to and be prepared to revisit in light of our current needs.
And truth also be told, the needs of a healthy environment are still too often seen as the enemies of progress instead of as an essential element of progress. So what is the state of Louisiana’s environment as the Governor-elect prepares to take office? Normally, such questions produce nuanced answers. Answers like, “We are doing well in some areas and not so well in others” or “On balance we are doing well and striving to do better”. Well, these are not normal times and a more straightforward answer is called for. Louisiana’s environment is not doing well, indeed it is approaching a state of collapse and it is urgent that the State pay heed and respond. The challenges are huge and real as the following list of factors shows:

- A collapsing coast that threatens to swallow our communities, our culture and our natural heritage.
- Air quality problems that constrain growth opportunities in Baton Rouge and elsewhere.
- Water quality and water quality monitoring so problematic that it is state policy to presume that many of our waterways are unsafe for human contact until someone proves otherwise.
- A hypoxic “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico that continues to grow despite nearly a decade of discussions about addressing it.
- Concerns about the safety of our fish and seafood that discourage its consumption and deny markets to our fishers.
- A changing and warming climate that puts Louisiana at risk yet which Louisiana has been slow to acknowledge and plan for.
- Soil contamination that inhibits the use and development of urban and rural lands and which pose threats to our public health.

Prior to Hurricane’s Katrina and Rita we might have been able to gloss over these issues, make incremental plans or mark incremental progress and paint a rosier picture. We can’t do that any longer and I mean no disrespect to the many people, my many peers included, who have worked so hard for so long improve our environmental record when I say that. We all hoped that we had more time before the time of crisis. But we were wrong.

The prospect of collapse cannot and should not be cause for despair or fatalism any more than the evacuation at Dunkirk signaled British defeat. Rather we must focus our efforts and stiffen our resolve and dare to forge a new relationship between our State and her environment. Our goal must be not only to forestall collapse but to have a healthy and sustainable environment that supports vibrant communities and a robust economy. In short, just as a football team can’t hope to win merely by playing strong
defense, we can’t prevail if we focus on mitigating our environmental problems but fail to seek opportunity. And Louisiana is still blessed with opportunity.

We are also blessed with a strong talent pool, both in and out of government, and a degree of public awareness that is unprecedented. Bringing our substantial natural and human resources to bear on our challenges and opportunities can help open the door to a new era of prosperity for our State and transform in a positive the way our State is viewed as place to live, work, and do business.

But that won’t just happen. We have to redefine our relationship with the environment. We have to begin by getting our terms right. The environment is not just something that is “out there”. It is part of us and we are part of it. It is not defined by agency jurisdictions nor is its health captured neatly by metrics such as parts-per-million of this or average annual habitat units of that. And, perhaps most importantly, it is not something to be tamed, beaten or mastered. If there is one lesson we have been taught, it is that. The corollary to that lesson is that we can’t improve our environment without creating economic opportunity, something Louisiana has been slow to recognize but is well positioned to change with strong direction from the Governor. The following growth opportunities demonstrate this:

- Air and water quality improvement has already spawned an environmental service industry while improving conditions for recreation and tourism. This should be recognized, celebrated and expanded.

- Coastal restoration will demand new science, new engineering and a project design and construction industry capable of working on a grand scale.

- Coping with climate change can spawn new energy and construction industries, as it already has elsewhere and is beginning to here, while also inspiring a greater degree of confidence that Louisiana is doing all it can to make this a safe place to invest.

- Louisiana is well positioned to prosper in the emerging “water economy” that will see opportunity driven increasingly by the availability of fresh water and navigable water.

In closing, it is vital for the Governor-elect to realize that this is both a challenge and an opportunity. It is also the duty of the State. Article IX of the Louisiana Constitution imposes a stewardship duty on the State. It is not optional and it is not conditional. How, and how well, the State meets that duty is however a matter of policy and priority. I can think of no greater or more encompassing issue facing our State. I can also think of no greater platform for creating opportunity or giving real and lasting meaning to the Governor-elect’s commitment to a fresh start for our state. It will be his legacy. It will also be ours.