

Conference Explores Social, Economic Aspects of Coastal Restoration

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"On one layer you have the biophysical sciences, and on the other layer you have the social and economic sciences," Dr. David K. Loomis told a national conference on the social and economic factors affecting coastal management. He is a human dimensions researcher from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

"When you look at coastal issues, you have to consider the social and economic as well as the biological and physical aspects."

The conference, sponsored by many including Louisiana Sea Grant and the LSU AgCenter's Center for Natural Resource Economics and Policy, was held on May 27-28 at the Lod and Carole Cook Conference Center and Hotel on the LSU campus in Baton Rouge.

Conference organizers said the topic – Challenges of Socioeconomic Research in Coastal Systems – is particularly important in Louisiana, where an estimated 1,900 square miles of coastal marsh have been lost in the past century. The meeting focused on economics and public policy.

"Although many people understand the science and physical losses associated with coastal erosion, few understand how people and communities cause and are affected by coastal erosion," said Dr. Rex Caffey, the center director and an associate professor in the LSU AgCenter's Department of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness and a conference organizer.

"We're looking at the constraints of social and economic situations, such as lawsuits associated with the Caernarvon diversion, as well as long-term environmental economic costs and how to calculate benefits."

The Caernarvon diversion reintroduced fresh water into marshes and led oyster leaseholders to bring suit, claiming that the fresh water damaged the productivity of their leases.

Loomis said the history of resource management dates back more than a century, but research into the human aspects of resource management – including public involvement, conflict resolution and litigation – has been around only since the mid-1980s.

Most state and federal resource management agencies are still characterized by the biophysical approach, which focuses on natural resources as commodities to be either exploited or conserved, Loomis said.

"When you look at situations such as the Caernarvon-oyster industry conflict, for example, you have to consider that when you make changes to restore the environment, you still have to account for people," said Dr. Richard Kazmierczak, an LSU AgCenter economist and another conference organizer.

The conference examined restoration programs currently used on U.S. coasts. Speakers included people with expertise about restoration in such areas as the Florida Everglades and Chesapeake Bay.

"We wanted to bring in expertise from other places and get them involved in Louisiana issues," Kazmierczak said. "It's not easy to integrate physical and social concerns."

About 140 people attended, including representatives from many Louisiana state agencies, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Louisiana parish governments and congressional staff members from Washington, D.C.

Joan Lawrence, senior Everglades policy advisor for the U.S. Department of the Interior, spoke about the tremendous challenges of dealing with multiple stakeholders in a dynamic physical and economic climate like the Florida Everglades.

"Restoring the Everglades is not rocket science or brain surgery," Lawrence said. "It's much more complicated than that."

Dr. Doug Lipton, a marine resource economist at the University of Maryland, said economic research pertaining to coastal systems still is in its infancy.

"Most of the economic research has been about the costs of restoration, but comparatively little work has been done documenting the benefits of various projects. It's not that these values don't necessarily exist, but they are often much harder to quantify."

Mark Davis, director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, said the way we manage our coastal resources is a testament to our values as a people.

"We converted Louisiana's coastline during the past century because it was perceived as the economically rational thing to do at the time," he said. "Successful restoration of this region also will be predicated on doing what is economically rational, given the most current research and values of today."

In addition to Louisiana Sea Grant College Program and LSU AgCenter's Center for Natural Resource Economics and Policy and its Department of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness, sponsors of the conference included the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act; The Farm Foundation; and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's SERA-IEG 30 committee.

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