

Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians: Rising Tides

For decades, the Isle de Jean Charles off the coast of Louisiana served as a refuge for the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians. Today, their island is vanishing into the sea, leaving residents stranded without a piece of dry land to stand on. Over the last fifty years, the island has lost all but a sliver of its landmass due to a variety of human activities, all likely exacerbated by the impacts of climate change.

Isle de Jean Charles is a slender ridge of land between Bayou Terrebonne and Bayou Pointe-aux-Chene in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana. Reachable only by boat or a wagon trail that disappeared during high tides, the island was virtually cut off from civilization until the 1950s. The island's isolation protected inhabitants from EuroAmerican settlers who banished nearby tribes to reservations in Oklahoma. Once considered "uninhabitable swamp land" by the state of Louisiana, the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians created a thriving subsistence lifestyle on the island of trapping, fishing, and agriculture. Their lifestyle changed little after the construction of the slim "island road" in 1953 because it became impassable during floods or when the wind shifted. Boats remained the most reliable source of transportation until the late 1990s when the road was elevated. This could explain why residents refer to the community as an island, while it is, in fact, a peninsula.



Despite the tribe's geographic isolation, "There's a lot of changes that happened on the island in my lifetime," says tribal Chief Albert Naquin. The oil and gas industry dredged canals and built pipelines that allowed saltwater to encroach upon and destroy the freshwater wetlands that surrounded Isle de Jean Charles until the 1960s. Besides providing crucial habitat for numerous species and other ecological services, wetlands protect coastal areas from storm surges and prevent erosion. As the island first began to wash away into the sea, levees constructed north of Isle de Jean Charles cut the community off from the Mississippi River and the sediment that replenishes the land.



Steady erosion coupled with intense storms and rising sea levels has spelled disaster for the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians of the Isle de Jean Charles. The island was once 15,000 acres, but the land has been whittled away to a tiny strip a quarter-mile wide by a half-mile long. Twenty-five houses and a couple fishing camps flank the town's single street-down from 63 only five years ago. The rest have been washed away into the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf's deep blue-green waters now cover the fields and forests where this community once raised its children. With a hint of resignation tainting his profound sorrow, tribal Chief Naquin

reminded that, "We could walk to our next town to the east and we could walk to the next town to the west... Where my dad and I used to trap, now they go there in boats to fish crabs."

There is no silver lining to the plight of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians, no light at the end of the tunnel. Their island is sinking into the sea and the erosion seems to hasten by the day, the flooding worse with each storm season. Some residents claim they lose an inch every twenty minutes. "With each hurricane, there's less and less protection," says Chief Naquin. "Back when I was a child, we used to ride out the hurricane on the island and not worry about flooding. We didn't have to worry about the winds either, because there were a lot of trees... And now it's basically an open field. So when a hurricane comes, it's like here we are, come and get us."

The plight of the islanders certainly did not start with global warming. It is the result of a half-century of irresponsible oil and natural gas extraction practices and a levee project that left the islanders at the mercy of some of Earth's most severe storms. Yet like so many issues associated with climate change, anthropogenic ecological disasters will likely be aggravated and hastened by a shifting climate. Scientists remain uncertain about the correlation between tropical storms and climate change, although studies strongly suggest that the issues are connected. Residents of Isle de Jean Charles have noticed a change, particularly after Hurricane Betsy in 1965. Since becoming chief in 1997, Naquin too thinks the storms have intensified. He speaks the names of the worst storms with intimate familiarity--Lili, Ivan, Katrina, Rita, Wilma, Gustav, Ike--no doubt remembering the hardships each has caused.

Beyond the storms, the sea level is simply higher than it used to be. The US EPA reports that sea levels in the Gulf Coast region rose five to six inches over the global average during the last century. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2007 report predicts that the sea will continue to rise another 0.6 to 2 feet by the turn of the next century due to melting glacial ice, as well as warmer ocean temperatures. Warm ocean temperatures are also a major factor in the development of tropical storms. The tides, too, are quite literally changing. Naquin reports that water levels from high- to low-tide change "maybe two feet within an hour." When he was a child, they varied by six inches. Their island road, elevated less than a decade ago, is cut in half during high tide; boats may again be the only way to reach what is left before it's gone completely.

While scientists are still uncertain about the magnitude of the impacts of climate change, one thing is certain: the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians of the Isle de Jean Charles are in trouble. It is too late to save the island, says Naquin. "It's like you have a cancer and you don't do nothing about it, and then by the time you do something about it it's too late... We've basically lost all our land. It's basically gone." The final hope died in 2002 when the Army Corp of Engineers decided to route a new 72-mile levee constructed as part of the Morganza to the Gulf Hurricane Protection Project around the island due to cost constraints. The Corp of Engineers proposed re-locating the entire community, but some residents refused to leave. Without 100 percent participation, the Corp dropped the offer. "The help now," the Naquin says, "is minimal."

To further complicate the issue, the tribe lacks federal recognition, making residents ineligible for federal assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). According to Naquin, "The red tape from being federally recognized is very, very red... They [the BIA] know we're Indians. We know we're Indians, but they just won't give us recognition because we don't have the proper historical records... Maybe they just don't want any more Indians." Thus, unlike Alaska Native Villages like Newtok, federal and state assistance will likely never come.

The choice to flee a sinking island and head to higher ground may seem easy, but with few resources to re-locate and an intimate connection with the land, residents are holding on to what's left. Many lack a formal education-the one room schoolhouse was closed fifty years ago-and remember the bounty they once had on the sliver of land in the middle of a Louisiana bayou. The Isle de Jean Charles holds the stories of their Elders, the bones of their ancestors, and the fabric of their culture. The Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians of the Isle de Jean Charles are fishermen. Leaving the island means leaving their world to vanish into the sea-and some are not quite ready to make that choice..

Resources

Louisiana Indian Village Holds Out Against Plea to Move

Article about impacts of rising sea level and resistance of residents to relocating. 2009 © News From Indian Country, December 16, 2009.

http://indiancountrynews.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=8061&Itemid=1

Audio: Native Americans Lose Land to Climate Change (The Environment Report)

Interview with Chief Albert Naquin, July 2009.

www.environmentreport.org/story.php?story_id=4582 

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The profile is available on the Tribes & Climate Change website: www4.nau.edu/tribalclimatechange/. The tribal climate change profiles featured on the website are intended to be a pathway to increasing knowledge among tribal and non-tribal organizations interested in learning about climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.

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