

A sad song for New Orleans

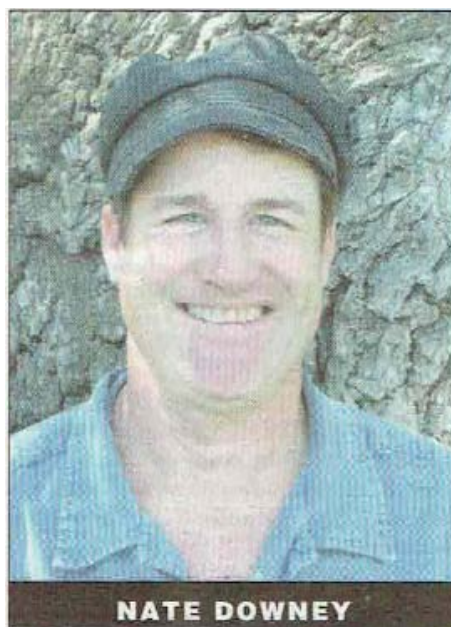
Before the surgical strikes over Libya, before Bush's ill-advised conquest of Iraq, before the Afghanistan quagmire, we were at war in the Mississippi Delta. Today, the fight continues.

While rural communities are sacrificed to prevent the inundation of New Orleans and Baton Rouge, the Army Corps of Engineers — and many others — scramble to fix a plethora of leaks along the levees. No one yet knows who will prevail. For now, it seems that people will beat back this spring's attacks, but nature is more patient and more determined than we. Like a pendulum, the main branch of any delta swings back and forth over geologic time. The question is when, not if, New Orleans will someday go the way of Atlantis.

The Biloxi, Chickasaw, and Mississippi Delta natives knew not to establish permanent residence. The first melee between the massive Mississippi and mere man dates back to the founding of Nouvelle Orleans on May 7, 1718. Months later, according to John McPhee in his visionary essay *Atchafalaya*, the river quickly fought back with a major flood.

The first and sometimes most important step in a permacultural landscape design is "site selection." If we make bad choices about where we live, it takes increased inputs to maintain our survival. If we properly choose the location for a city, a home, or a garden, the job of creating sustainability becomes easier — instantly.

Permaculturalists (and all with common sense) avoid building in floodplains and wildfire-prone sectors of land. We look for places with ample water, great soil, and plenty of sunlight. Protected from wind and far from any fault lines or toxic-waste sites, our greatest hope is to find an inexpensive parcel of land that's nestled in the south-facing, middle section of a slope. On this strip of land, often called the "thermal belt," temperatures tend to be more comfortable and far less prone to hitting record highs or lows.



Paradise. The Garden of Eden. Nirvana. Utopia. The perfect location for a sustainable city, home, or garden is not easy to find. Most of the time, we have to make do with what we have. But we should also recognize any losing battles that we are in with Mother Nature. The natives were right to maintain a certain restlessness along the banks of the Mississippi and its distributaries. They knew you can pass through and even live off of a big river delta, but you can't expect to inhabit any one mudflat forever.

It's with great uneasiness that I bring you this big news, but the most ethical thing for us to do would be to clean up and abandon New Orleans in the near future. The potential for catastrophic loss of life is real, and the probability of our long-term defense of the city is nonexistent.

Sometimes the most important resource that we gain from an event is knowledge, so don't worry. The likes of me are nowhere near winning the argument. I must say though that I fear the horror of the event that will cause the pendulum to shift and thereby force the exodus to begin.

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