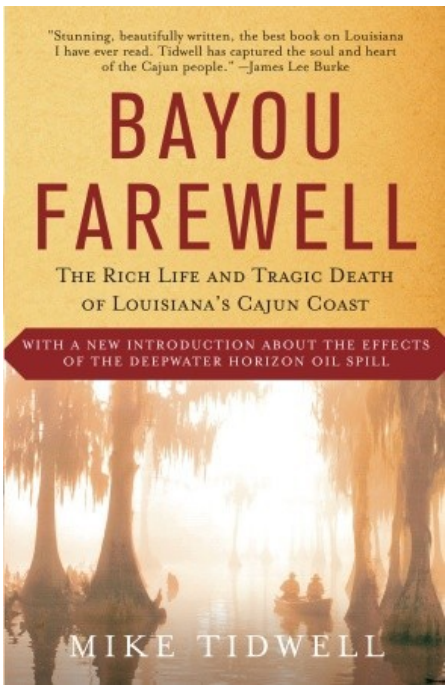

Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast

Mike Tidwell

Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast

Mike Tidwell

Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast Mike Tidwell
The Cajun coast of Louisiana is home to a way of life as unique, complex, and beautiful as the terrain itself. As award-winning travel writer Mike Tidwell journeys through the bayou, he introduces us to the food and the language, the shrimp fisherman, the Houma Indians, and the rich cultural history that makes it unlike any other place in the world. But seeing the skeletons of oak trees killed by the salinity of the groundwater, and whole cemeteries sinking into swampland and out of sight, Tidwell also explains why each introduction may be a farewell—as the storied Louisiana coast steadily erodes into the Gulf of Mexico.

Part travelogue, part environmental exposé, *Bayou Farewell* is the richly evocative chronicle of the author's travels through a world that is vanishing before our eyes.

Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast Details

Date	:	Published March 9th 2004 by Vintage (first published 2003)
ISBN	:	9780375725173
Author	:	Mike Tidwell
Format	:	Paperback 384 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, History, Travel, Environment, Nature

From Reader Review Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast for online ebook

Gay says

I read this book shortly after Katrina. Here's the review I wrote on Amazon.

According to Michael Tidwell, in his book Bayou Farewell, twenty-five miles of Louisiana coastline disappear each year. That's 25. 2-5. And this statistic may be more dramatic in the wake of Katrina and Rita, yet most of us are unaware of what is happening in the estuaries of Southern Louisiana. The state's rich supply of wildlife, animal, marine, and avian, is threatened by the advance of the Gulf of Mexico into the wetlands. It's turning fresh water into salt, drowning native grasses, oak trees, cemeteries, and small towns. Changes in the fragile chemistry of the wetlands endangers oysters and crabs. Eventually the migration route for the white and brown shrimp will disappear. The people of this area are in retreat. Louisiana fishermen supply "an astonishing 30 percent of American's annual seafood harvest, measured by weight." When the wildlife is gone and the people are relocated to higher ground, we all lose.

In recent years, many of us have experienced the unique culture of "Sout' Loosiane" by traveling to New Orleans and perhaps cruising down Bayou Black or Lafourche. Many of us know Louisiana through movies like The Big Easy and books such as Heaven's Prisoners by James Lee Burke. And most of us have fallen in love with the food, the shrimp okra gumbo, the blackened red-fish, the crawfish etoufee. Would there be the BAM of Emeril without Cajun food? What's Cajun food without Louisiana shrimp, red-fish, oysters, and crabs? The state's plight is everyone's problem and Tidwell's book takes you deep into the heart of the swamp.

Writing before Katrina and Rita, Tidwell relates his journey through the wetlands via shrimp trawlers, crab boats, and oil-company supply ship. He hitch-hikes down bayous and canals, meeting and talking with Cajuns, the Houma tribe, Vietnamese settlers, and the environmentalists who are trying to wake up America to this continuing tragedy. Author and Louisianan Burke says Bayou Farewell is "The best book on Louisiana I have ever read...stunning, beautifully written," and I have to add that it's a jolting call to arms for the coastline along the Gulf of Mexico. It reminds me of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring, a book length essay about man's responsibility to the planet and to ourselves. Silent Spring changed the way we think about our custodial duty to the environment and Bayou Farewell admonishes us as to how we have forgotten that duty.

Over thousands of years, the Mississippi has built the delta that makes up Southern Louisiana. The estuary and its wildlife developed because of the river's constant deposit of sediment at its mouth. This natural process has been interrupted by man and levee system which now takes that sediment and dumps it over the continental shelf and into the Gulf of Mexico. In other words, Louisiana wetlands are being starved of its nourishment of dirt, mud, silt, sand. As the sediment is denied into the area, the salty waters of the Gulf are filling the void, moving farther and farther inland. The end result is the disappearance of the land, the creatures that inhabit it, and a unique way of life.

There are solutions to help rebuild the coastline and estuaries, but Tidwell warns us to take action now. At the rate of twenty-five miles per year, that gives us maybe thirty years before it's all gone.

I urge you to read Bayou Farewell and tell others to read it. Send it to your congressman. Thanks for your attention and time.

Erik Loomis says

This is a first rate book on the destruction of the bayous. Also a great book for understanding why Hurricane Katrina was so destructive. It's really sad admittedly, but Tidwell is a strong writer and it's enjoyable at the same time.

April says

This is one of the best non fiction books I've read. Tidwell does an excellent job of describing a very complex environmental and social problem with many of the details included, while making it interesting and easy to read. His experiences in the Bayou with the peoples that live on the land there are phenomenal. This book is an excellent suggestion for anyone interested in either environmental, social or travel stories. I would like to have all Americans read it.

Hillary says

The southern coast of Louisiana, consisting of marshy wetlands, small islands, and miles upon miles of twisting and turning bayous, is the fastest disappearing landmass on earth. And yet almost no one outside of Louisiana has heard anything about this looming environmental disaster. The southern coast contributes billions of dollars each year to the state’s economy and Louisiana alone produces around 30% of the nation’s seafood. Not to mention the fact that the southern wetlands protect the rest of the state from inundating waves and disastrous flooding from hurricanes each year. In addition, the wetlands are nesting and breeding territory for thousands of birds, a rest stop for those birds migrating, and a home to hosts of other animals including alligators, dolphins, snapping turtles, crabs, shrimp, and other land and sea creatures. And even though a plan that experts agree would halt the land loss and, over time, actually build new land, was first proposed in the 70s, it has not become even close to being implemented. Bayou Farewell follows Tidwell as he travels the bayous of southern Louisiana on shrimp, crab, and oil boats, working and staying with Cajuns, Houma Indians, and the Vietnamese who settled en masse in the Louisiana wetlands after the Vietnam war, and those scientist and environmentalists working to save this quickly disappearing wetland.

The reason for the wetlands turning to ocean at an alarming rate, of houses and whole communities turning to open sea water is simple: in 1927, after the Great Mississippi Flood, the worst flood in US history, the Mississippi was dammed and placed under control with a series of levees. Bound on all sides, the Mississippi can no longer flood naturally and release its tons of sediments it gathers on its journey to the Gulf of Mexico. Instead, it dumps this earth uselessly into the continental shelf. With the wetlands cut off from the Mississippi, it can no longer receive the sediments and dirt it so desperately needs and the land, hounded by waves, begins to disappear. The situation is made worse by the fact the bayous are crisscrossed with literally thousands of miles of canals built by the oil industry to make the laying of pipe underneath the bayou easier. These canals erode at an alarmingly fast rate and literally eat the earth away, causing more devastation.

Scientists believe that it took 7,000 years for the Mississippi and its sediment load to create the Louisiana wetlands. In the past century a third of this land has disappeared, due just about entirely to human interference. But the process can be slowed and even reversed if the Third Delta Conveyance Channel is

built. First proposed in the 1970s, the idea is to build a man-made river bottom and to let around a third of the Mississippi divert its current levee restrained course north of New Orleans and let it flow to the south. This would ensure that life-giving sediment reaches the areas that need it most and, slowly, the loss land would be halted and, with decades, reversed. It is unlikely that the conveyance channel would restore the wetlands to its original state- too much has been lost- but some land can be recovered and the fishing and shrimping economy that so many depend on would be sustained. Unfortunately, the plan would cost billions of dollars and Louisiana is chronically short on funds. But the solution is there. Within a decade or two the coast will be so eroded that it would be impossible to restore it; it will be gone forever. It is critical to act now to ensure this unique environmental and cultural pocket of America survives.

Tidwell does an excellent job describing the dangers facing these wetlands and the people who inhabit it. The area is the cultural bastion for the Cajun culture and thus is an area close to my heart as I am Cajun on my father's side. The situation as it stands now is very bleak, and as far as I am aware no meaningful progress to make the Third Delta Conveyance Channel a reality has been made since this was published, but I remain hopeful.

Besides describing the environmental crises, Tidwell does an excellent job telling of the crisis facing the people who depend on the bayou for their livelihood. He describes with great sensitivity the issues facing those literally watching the land recede before their eyes. He spends time with Cajuns, Houma Indians, and Vietnamese depicting these unique cultures and their concerns fairly and without judgement. To be honest, I would have preferred less time dealing with Tidwell and his personal experiences and more time with those fighting to save the bayous and wetlands from utter destruction, but I did enjoy the fact that it gave me a chance to 'meet' the people of the bayou.

This book was published in 2003, before Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, both of which caused terrible damage to the area environmentally, economically, and emotionally to the people themselves who lost homes, jobs, or their lives. I can't help wanting to know how the coast was affected by theses events- how much marsh turned to sea by Katrina, how the health of the water and the animals were effected by the oil spill, and whether these events intensified the urgent need to save this landscape in the eyes of government officials who so far have acted frustratingly slowly to effect desperately needed change.

But that will have to be something that I find out on my own. I am not sure how many other books are out there on the topic of Louisiana's disappearing coastline, but I know that there are tons of books out there on the BP oil spill and Hurricane Katrina. I'll have to do some research and see which ones interest me the most, but this is a topic that I would like to explore more in the future.

Jack Perreault says

A poignant story of the disappearing wetland and an unfolding disaster. The story is told through living and working with the chief culture of the Bayou the Cajuns. The desire for oil without concern for environmental consequences has led to the disappearance of an acre of land every 20 min. and consequently the culture and homes and livelihood of the fishermen who live and work on the Bayou.

Kurt says

If you're from South Louisiana and you don't read this book, your Louisiana Card should be revoked.

Andy says

In June, I filled in with an ecology lab at LSU's Dept. of Oceanography and Coastal Studies (basically, my friend Joe threw me a bone). This was a great way to close out my time in Louisiana--finally seeing (and trudging through) the disappearing wetlands of the state. And this book helped me pull it all together...

Louisiana contains fully 40% of the nation's wetlands, and as Tidwell explains, these aren't just mosquito-breeding fields, but rich ecosystems upon which the entire nation depends. Of course, as we all know post-Katrina & Rita, they provide also provide buffers from storm surge.

For a variety of reasons--almost all the consequence of either oil & gas drilling or the maintenance of the Mississippi's shipping channel via the Corps of Engineers-maintained levee system, Louisiana's wetlands are disappearing at a rate of about a football field every 38 minutes.

As Tidwell goes to great pains to show, this is not an abstraction, but has tangible and immediately obvious consequences on both the landscape and the communities who depend on these wetlands. Like many nature writers, he veers quickly and often in the purplest of proses: his metaphors are strained at times, particularly when describing something beautiful, and in his reverence for a
"simpler" way of life on the bayou, he risks fetishizing his subject. Such is often the case with nature and travel writing. I was able to get past these stylistic issues because the analysis and the reportage is so meaty. Wholeheartedly recommonded.

Sean Chick says

A moving personal account of the cultures that survive on the edge of America, mostly Cajun but also Houma and Vietnamese. Written in 2003, its dire predictions and warnings hurt even more in 2018 as the world stumbles towards an environmental disaster Tidwell clearly sees. It was also interesting to read a work about a more unique cultural diversity, instead of "a hip slogan we mumbled on the way to the same melting-pot mall" to quote Tidwell. The current diversity debate, itself lacking a more thorough discussion of culture and class, pales a bit compared to this this work. For one, Bayou Farewell was written without the condescension of more contemporary works that pathologize, rather than empathize, with whites in the countryside. In addition, it is before the current racial debate placed whites into a homogeneous mass (as evidenced in most Coates essays at The Atlantic) rather than seeing the differences between said cultures. Tidwell's honesty, perceptiveness, and empathy is sorely lacking in the current culture war.

Carolyn says

Most accurate description I've read of coastal Louisiana and Cajun culture...he does a great job of capturing

the feeling of being in South Louisiana, especially the food, the people, and unfortunately the disappearing coast. I've never been so sad, proud, and hungry all at the same time while reading a book. While reading on the subway I looked up several times shocked to see that I was in NYC and not on a boat somewhere in a bayou.

Hannah says

It's always interesting to get an outsider's perspective on your own culture. Sometimes he understands it very well. At other times, he misses the mark. In this case, Mike Tidwell hits the mark very well. He includes Southern Louisiana folklore, mentioning swamp Cajuns, the Houma Indians, and the Vietnamese. He impressively integrates the folklore into his devastated story about the loss of Louisiana's coastline. The lives and cultures he describes sums up many Louisianan's experiences, especially the story about the oil industry. Despite the fact that this book was printed in the early-mid 2000s, the information in it still applies now, more than 5 years later.

Tidwell writes his adventures in a fiction-like style, incorporating facts and scientific information here and there. The information integrates well with the rest of his story. He's a great storyteller. The only issue I have is with some of his descriptions. At one point, he makes Cajun food sound sexually appetizing, which is just weird in my opinion. The food is good, but I don't think his descriptions accurately describe it. They make the food seem like it's better than it actually is. I have been told, however, that Louisiana puts a bigger emphasis on food than we realize, so maybe his descriptions of the food just seem weird to me because I'm used to good food. Besides the food descriptions, there are a few scenes that I couldn't help but make fun of. For instance, at one point, I got an image of a "sexy" shrimp, floating around the marshes and gloating in all its glory. Then in another scene, Tidwell made the fish eating the shrimp look like Godzilla-like monsters attack the sexy shrimp. It's quite humorous, though I don't think it was Tidwell's intention to make it that way. I can't take a lot of his descriptions seriously. He seems to overstate somethings, which makes him seem a bit naive and idealistic. However, if you're interested in learning more about Louisiana, I definitely recommend this book.

Alisa says

The Louisiana coastline is disappearing at the astonishing rate of 25 acres a day. EVERY DAY. But when you mention this to people, at best they will lament the sad sate of environmental affairs and our seeming inability to make progress on battling climate change but more likely they will just shrug their shoulders. It may be sad but what can be done? Plenty, if there was political will and money and business and government and communities working together. The reason a lot of people shrug their shoulders over this however is that they really don't understand what it means to them in real terms. The Gulf of Mexico and specifically the gulf coast of Louisiana is a huge source of the seafood consumed in America, and that industry supports the livelihood and way of life for generations of people who still live off the land and perpetuate a unique culture. The ecosystem of the gulf waters is also dying off rapidly with the deterioration of the marshlands. Can the erosion be reversed? Can the coastline be rebuilt or at least saved? Can the gulf oil & gas industry operate in a way that minimizes impact on the environment, and is there a role for them to play in rebuilding part of what they destroyed with all the canal dredging in the gulf access waterways? Ironically, some of the very forces that are destroying the wetlands are creating a boom in brown shrimp harvest. The very people whose means of earning a living relies on this harvest are experiencing a boom that is on the verge of turning

to bust in a few short years. Then what happens? Where will they go? The loss of natural barriers also means the loss of protection from hurricanes. A strong enough storm unimpeded has the potential to wipe out not only the coastal communities, but New Orleans and upriver to Baton Rouge and beyond. You think Katrina was bad? It can get a whole lot worse very soon unless something is done. NOW.

I got carried away there for a minute with the questions, but they are real, and the issues are important, and deserve far more attention than the short shrift the topic gets today.

This book sounds the alarm on the current state of affairs of deterioration of the bayous and coastline of Louisiana. Part environmental treatise, part travelogue, part cultural examination, and delivered with a vivid illustrative and heartfelt narrative, this book is really a love letter to the bayou. The author manages to mix science and culture studies to tell the story of this huge ecological dilemma through the eyes and words of the people who live along the bayous and rely, in some way, on the gulf for their survival. Really well done, highly recommend this book to anyone who cares about our environment. If nothing else it will give you new appreciation for the shrimp on your plate.

Brian says

This book was special for me. It spoke of a place, of customs, and people I'd nearly forgotten because of distance and time put between us. Through weekly talks with my parents, emails of news articles, and reading of online bayou papers I've been kept informed of the disappearing Louisiana coast. My annual trips to the bayou also remind me how fast the land is sinking. I see the differences each year and they're not subtle differences. Places I used to walk, build 'camps', sit under trees and fish are now just water. Prairies of marsh grass around Leeville with little *trinasse's* [water channels:] meandering through the fields of green are now just open water. The community is drowning.

Mike Tidwell's book is non-fiction, but it reads like fiction, even like science fiction at times. His message about the disappearing coast is clear. But this is not simply a study of coastal erosion. He travels and lives with the people who call the bayou home, refugees of past wars, people pushed to the southern extremes to eke out a living; the Cajuns, the Indians, and the Vietnamese (before the giant hurricane of 1893 there was even a Chinese community living on the bayou).

I learned just recently that FEMA does not recognize the levee system protecting the lower Lafourche Parish. As a result of this, flood insurance is expected to triple. People are now paying nearly 3 times the amount of their mortgages on insurance. Many are forced to leave. Many don't have insurance.

Simply put, the taming of the Mississippi River and the oil rush of the 20th century created the problem we see today. Plans have been developed to right this wrong. But it appears that once again the Cajuns, the Indians, and the Vietnamese will have to move on and look for other lands, exiled again.

• "Diz life down here," he says, "it's in [the:] blood. He just don't realize it yet. He don't realize he can go wherever he wants but he'll never be happy unless he lives down de baya. What good's a job payin' a million dollars if you ain't happy?"

• Before we drift off, Phan lights a final Marlboro in the dark. His Asian face glows with a faint orange hue as he says, "I think, you know, I'm like special eel in Thailand or salmon in Alaska. Many years go by and I travel far from home and I grow up and now, much time later, I make long trip back, thousands of miles

back, to place where my life began, to place where I was born."

• My travels along the coast are almost over, and the sadness that comes at the end of any meaningful journey is now compounded by the very real possibility that I will never pass this way again. Not because I don't want to, but because the place won't exist. It might be gone. In all my travels around the world I've never had to say goodbye to a place in quite this manner. I've never even imagined such a place could exist. **The traveler is supposed to go away, not the destination**.

• ... land is still disappearing at the astonishing rate of 25 to 35 square miles per year.
(this was a pre-Katrina/Rita estimate)

Desiree says

Hands down, a must read for anyone who loves Louisiana and/or the Cajun culture. A fascinating, but sad look at the state of the culture and the State of Louisiana. As a native Louisianian, I found it difficult to read this book as it made me sad to see what's happening to the place where I was born and raised. This place is so special to me, but just like many of my fellow Cajuns, I have fled the state in search of better job opportunities. It's sad to see that a smart, motivated individual has a hard time making a living wage in Louisiana, but the author explores the question of "Why" and documents what is happening to the people who are choosing to stay. A culture is being lost along with land - at a very swift pace.

A great read, even though it does make me sad to think of the future (or lack thereof) of Louisiana and the Cajun culture.

Laura says

This book is about the coastal erosion of Louisiana. It is told by a man who traveled the bayous and bays of the La. coast with the people who live there. I like that it is about the people and not a just a sermon about how desperate the situation is along the coast. And the situation is extreme.

Lauren says

Thorough and engaging reporting about what is really happening to Louisiana's coast. Tidwell helps readers grasp the enormity of the problem, info you would hope that leaders/politicians and the Army Corps of Engineers would have, but it doesn't seem that way.
