



The Live Oak trees seen throughout the region are giant communities of life.

Shannon Dosemagen of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade describes how peoples with undocumented traditional land ownership rights in the severely impacted Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans lost Federal reconstruction support following Hurricane Katrina.



Queen Chief Warhorse of the Cha'Taa ("Choctaw") nation insists on justice for her people through the restoration of legally-binding Federal treaty obligations to large land tracts throughout the Gulf region.

We were prevented from entering this beach, denied press passes despite my hazardous waste training, and filmed the cleanup crews from a distance.



The Bayou La Batre, AL, shrimp fleet is still largely idle despite the shrimp season being opened. Shrimpers are still very concerned about potential health effects because government data have either not been released or are considered inadequate.

Captain Louis Skrmetta is owner of the Ship Island Ferry line, MS, and a board member of the Gulf Restoration Network. Capt. Skrmetta is outspoken about his concerns that poor management of the spill response resulted from reliance on outside contractors—but left out experienced local wisdom.



Tar balls recovered on Ship Island Beach surge in numbers periodically with severe weather.

The incredibly rich Gulf Coastal ecosystems provide habitat for a huge variety of animals and plants.



Building a Commons Across the Gulf

Jason Bender and Kevin Hansen

The recent BP oil spill was a huge disaster, yet the Gulf of Mexico has long been an abused ecosystem. For decades, the Mississippi River has drained pollutants into the Gulf from nitrogen rich corn-fields, chemically-treated golf courses, oil-polluted parking lots and sewage runoff. The Gulf is home to a huge and aging oil/chemicals infrastructure, including nearly 4,000 drilling and production platforms. Critical habitat for shrimp and fish is jammed together with heavy industry. Believing they need both industry and habitat, the loyalties of the local people are often conflicted: their voices often silenced. To re-energize them, new ideas are needed.

Could these ideas come from a commons-focused engagement process to protect and expand the prosperity of both ecosystems and people in the Gulf? This question forms the starting point for a new dialog about the commons, organized by Global Commons Trust, a non-profit organization leading a coalition called Commons Action for the United Nations. Using the power of film to galvanize and focus action, they have partnered with filmmakers at PierreTerre.com. This coalition is seeking to help co-coordinate and film the participation of commoners along the entire gulf coast bioregion, including five states in the US, five states in Mexico, and Cuba.

In August, our team traveled for nine days across the northeastern Gulf Coast region in the U.S. During the filming, we heard many points of view, from shrimpers and fishermen, researchers, ship captains, tribal leaders, scientists and engaged citizens. Though tired and mistrustful of previous efforts, especially since Hurricane Katrina, many seemed hungry for new ideas.

In a series of moving interviews, we heard the strong sense that people know the right things to do, but feel they are not being listened to, nor empowered, to make decisions for the management and preservation of their shared resources. Again and again, our subjects described the same thing: how they are working to restore access and rights to their traditional commons, despite strong resistance from governments and businesses.

The Gulf commons project is an attempt to re-empower citizens with knowledge of their natural rights to manage their own resources. The engagement process envisions facilitating cross-scale and cross-border collaboration among gulf coast citizens as social chartered organizations, regaining their natural sovereignty as a counterbalance to the huge power of government and the private sector.

Filming will continue as the dialog grows throughout the Gulf. An introductory commons short film will be produced this autumn, followed by a feature-length documentary.

For more information on social chartered organizations, commons trusts, and commons rights, please see www.globalcommons-trust.org.