

[E-mail Author](#)
[Send to a Friend](#)
[Version](#)

September 08, 2005, 8:24 a.m.

Greens vs. Levees

Destructive river-management philosophy.

By John Berlau

With all that has happened in the state, it's understandable that the Louisiana chapter of the Sierra Club may not have updated its website. But when its members get around to it, they may want to change the wording of one item in particular. The [site](#) brags that the group is "working to keep the Atchafalaya Basin," which adjoins the Mississippi River not far from New Orleans, "wet and wild."

These words may seem especially inappropriate after the breaking of the levee that caused the tragic events in New Orleans last week. But "wet and wild" has a larger significance in light of those events, and so does the group using the phrase. The national Sierra Club was one of several environmental groups who sued the Army Corps of Engineers to stop a 1996 plan to raise and fortify Mississippi River levees.

The Army Corps was planning to upgrade 303 miles of levees along the river in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas. This was needed, a Corps spokesman told the Baton Rouge, La., newspaper *The Advocate*, because "a failure could wreak catastrophic consequences on Louisiana and Mississippi which the states would be decades in overcoming, if they overcame them at all."

But a suit filed by environmental groups at the U.S. District Court in New Orleans claimed the Corps had not looked at "the impact on bottomland hardwood wetlands." The lawsuit stated, "Bottomland hardwood forests must be protected and restored if the Louisiana black bear is to survive as a species, and if we are to ensure continued support for source population of all birds breeding in the lower Mississippi River valley." In addition to the Sierra Club, other parties to the suit were the group American Rivers, the Mississippi River Basin Alliance, and the Louisiana, Arkansas and Mississippi Wildlife Federations.

The lawsuit was settled in 1997 with the Corps agreeing to hold off on some work while doing an additional two-year environmental impact study. Whether this delay directly affected the levees that broke in New Orleans is difficult to ascertain.

But it is just one illustration of a destructive river-management philosophy that took hold in the '90s, influenced the Clinton administration, and had serious policy consequences. Put simply, it's impossible to understand the delays in building levees without being aware of the opposition of the environmental groups to dams, levees, and anything that interfered with the "natural" river flow. The group [American Rivers](#), which leads coalitions of eco-groups on river policy, has for years actually called its campaign, "[Rivers Unplugged](#)."

Over the past few years, levees came to occupy the same status for environmental groups as roads in forests — an artificial barrier to nature. They frequently campaigned against levees being built and shored up on the nation's rivers, including on the Mississippi.

In 2000, American Rivers' Mississippi River Regional Representative [Jeffrey Stein complained](#) in a

congressional hearing that the river's "levees that temporarily protect floodplain farms have reduced the frequency, extent and magnitude of high flows, robbing the river of its ability ... to sustain itself." Similarly, the National Audubon Society, referring specifically to Louisiana, has [this statement](#) slamming levees on its website, "Levees have cut off freshwater flows, harming fishing and creating salt water intrusion." The left-leaning Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, in describing a grant it gave to Environmental Defense, [blasted](#) "the numerous levees and canals built on the lower Mississippi River" because "such structures disrupt the natural flows of the Mississippi River's sediments."

Some went beyond opposition to building or repairing levees. At an Army Corps of Engineers meeting concerning the Mississippi River in 2002, Audubon official Dan McGuinness even [recommended](#) "looking at opportunities to lower or *remove* levees [emphasis added]" from the river.

The groups argued that the "natural" way would lead to better river management, but it was clear they had other agendas in mind besides flood control. They were concerned because levees were allegedly threatening their beloved exotic animals and plants. In his testimony, American Rivers's Stein noted that the Mississippi River was home to "double-crested cormorant, rare orchids, and many other species," which he implied were put at risk by man-made levees.

So far the environmental movement's role in the events leading to the flooding has been little discussed. One exception is former Rep. Bob Livingston (R., La.), who told Fox News on Saturday that environmentalists were one of the major reasons levee projects were held up.

At this point, there are still questions about the particular levees that broke in New Orleans. Care should be taken about drawing direct conclusions about the causes until there are more facts. But there are some important points that are clear that should put in perspective about levee funding and flood control.

Nearly all flood-control projects — even relatively small ones — are subject to a variety of assessments for effects on wetlands, endangered species, and other environmental concerns. These reviews can be costly and delay projects by years. In the '90s, for instance, the Clinton administration's Environmental Protection Agency required a comprehensive environmental impact statement just to repair [a few Colorado River levees that had been destroyed in the floods of 1993](#).

The Clinton administration would frequently side with environmentalists on flood-control projects, even against local Democrats. The Army Corps of Engineers under Clinton began implementing a planned "spring rise" of the Missouri River that would raise water levels on the Missouri River during part of the year. This was supported by eco-groups, who argued that this restored the river's natural flows and protected a bird called the piping plover. But farm groups and others said that combined with the ice melting from winter, the project [could increase](#) the risk of flooding in river communities and affect more than 1 million acres of productive farmland. Nearly all the Republicans and Democrats in Missouri's congressional delegation [opposed](#) the plan, as did Missouri's late Democratic governor, Mel Carnahan. But the Clinton administration refused to budge, and this was a major factor in Bush's carrying of Missouri in 2000.

The Bush administration's flood-control efforts were often relentlessly opposed by environmental groups, and this opposition was frequently echoed by liberal activists and in the press. Bush kept his promise, and his appointees at the Corps of Engineers have stopped the "spring rise" plan that concerned so many about flooding. Environmentalists [launched](#) a barrage of criticism and a series of lawsuits. This was also the case with Bush's moves to stop the Clinton administration's plans to breach the dams on the Columbia and Snake Rivers in the northwest. Even though the dams greatly help to control flooding in the region, American Rivers [blasted](#) the administration for failing to do enough to save the sockeye salmon native to the region.

Ironically, among those criticizing Bush for his actions to prevent flooding of the Missouri River was the ever-present anti-Bush environmental activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. He chastised Bush in 2004 for “managing the flow of the Missouri River.” If, before Katrina, Bush had proceeded full-speed ahead and fortified the levees of the Mississippi for a Category 5 hurricane, Kennedy and others of his ilk would very likely have criticized Bush for trying to manage the natural flow of the Mississippi. And it’s a good bet that many of the lefty bloggers now critical of Bush for not reinforcing the levees would have cited Bush’s levee fortification as another way he was despoiling the natural environment.

— *John Berlau is the Warren T. Brookes Journalism Fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute.*

<http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/berlau200509080824.asp>