

SoLa: Louisiana Water Stories. Dir. Jon Bowermaster. Bullfrog Films, 2010.

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SoLa: Louisiana Water Stories introduces the ecological and economic issues that faced Louisiana just before the BP oil spill in April 2010. All was not well long before Hurricane Katrina, as Spike Lee made clear in his documentary *When The Levees Broke* that covered some of the same terrain. Yet while the state's problems have largely dropped out of the news cycle, an environmental disaster continues to brew. The pollution of Louisiana's water by oil has the potential to wreck an age-old way of life.

One of the most watery states, low-lying Louisiana is home to countless wetlands as well as a \$200 million fishing industry. It also houses 200 petrochemical plants along a 100-mile stretch of the Mississippi River and the world's largest dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. Water, the very element that is the centerpiece of life in southern Louisiana, is slowly being destroyed by the oil and gas industry. Profits have been deemed more important than the continued maintenance of the Cajun culture and the many family-run fishing businesses. Yet while Katrina and the BP oil spill drew hordes of reporters, little attention is being paid to the continuing harmful impact of oil production on Louisiana's environment.

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The film is somewhat choppy, perhaps because director Jon Bowermaster tries to cover such a span of water-related topics in the space of an hour. Transitions between segments, for example, are lacking. However, Bowermaster's points are worth presenting to a broad audience. He notes that more than 40% of U.S coastal wetlands are in southern Louisiana. The 1.4 million acres of the Atchafalaya Basin may well be home to more biological diversity than any other ecosystem in North America, with more than 100 species of fish and over 300 species of birds. Without this ecosystem, several bird species would likely become extinct. Dean Wilson, an Atchafalaya Basin keeper and member of the Save Our Cypress Coalition, explains on camera that the tens of thousands miles of canals cut through the wetlands to aid the oil and gas industry have brought pollution to the area, threatening the survival of the basin. Additionally, illegal logging of cypress has taken more than a tenth of the cypress in Louisiana since 2000. The loss of these natural barriers to storm surges increases the threat posed by hurricanes.

Instead of focusing solely on hurricane-related damage, Bowermaster also addresses the impact of Big Oil in Louisiana. Bowermaster argues that oil spills have been "business as usual" in the state for some time, with resulting damage to the environment. As Bowermaster concluded shooting the film, the *Deepwater Horizon* well exploded on April 20, 2010. The five million barrels of oil that escaped from the well in the worst manmade ecological disaster to date severely damaged, and may have destroyed, the way of life depicted in the film.

While beautifully filmed, the film feels incomplete and leaves several points unexplained though bonus sections provide additional interview material. Despite signs and t-shirts in several segments of the film that promote the Waterkeeper Alliance, no

explanation of this anti-pollution advocacy group is presented. Founded by environmental attorney Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in 1999, Waterkeeper patrols waterways and pursues polluters in court. The omission of a group that apparently means a great deal to southern Louisianans, especially the ones filmed, is odd.

The film, with its connection to Louisiana and call for action, is bound to draw comparisons with Lee's documentary. Both works raise myriad social, economic, and governmental issues and both demand that audiences engage in soul-searching about who we are as a nation. But Lee's film is a far more in-depth accounting of a disaster that has already taken place. Bowermaster uses *SoLa* to explain a disaster that is in process and that may yet be halted. His film has greater environmental breadth but much less depth, particularly with respect to economic issues. Bowermaster's film, however, has a greater national significance. Every part of the United States faces some manifestation of the issues facing southern Louisianans.

Overall, the documentary seems designed for classroom use by presenting pieces of southern Louisiana's story in short segments. It works better in pieces than in its entirety, unlike Lee's more elegant and artistic film. *SoLa* is useful as the starting point for a discussion of what should be valued by society: people over profits, health over short-term wealth, and family businesses over polluting corporations. It is a superb introduction to the threat posed by the oil and gas industry to life itself.