“No environmental battle is ever won, only delayed”: 30 Years of Environmental Activism on the Mississippi Coast

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“No environmental battle is ever won, only delayed”: 30 Years of Environmental of Activism on the Mississippi Coast
(Memoir by Steve Shepard, Gulf Coast Group Chair, Mississippi Sierra Club)

The Gulf Coast Group of the Sierra Club was started in 1977 when I was fresh out of art school and employed by Gulf Coast Research Lab, Ocean Springs. Initially I stayed away from the Club due to the lab director’s edict that all employees were subject to firing if they spoke to news media about the DuPont plant locating in Delisle, MS. The state of Georgia had rejected DuPont’s request to locate there because DuPont planned to emit noxious gases into the atmosphere, pump a cloudy flocculent into the nearby waters, and inject toxins into the earth. So, of course, Mississippi welcomed DuPont, and DuPont hired Gulf Coast Research Lab to test effluents--carefully-chosen, mostly nontoxic effluents--to show that they would not pollute Mississippi’s waters.

I worked in the toxicology section at GCRL and can testify that the DuPont-selected chemical mix, when introduced to a few marine species in sea water, did no harm to them. But a curious flocculent, a cloudy particulate similar to the “snow” in snow globes, would form when the effluent reached bay waters. This caused considerable concern to the physiology section head, Dr. Venkhataramiah. Before the GCRL director banned public comment, Dr. Venkhataramiah warned the local paper that the cloudy flocculent would probably suppress sea grass formation and might smother bottom dwelling organisms and lead to problems for sea life in St. Louis Bay. This honest scientific assessment—which research would probably confirm today—came out immediately before Dr. Venkhataramiah was fired in 1983 or so. Some of us at GCRL used to talk about his firing being part of a purge. In one stroke, GCRL dismissed this senior staff member, his closest associate, and some other scientists, while retaining most other employees.

I mention this case to inform the readers of DuPont’s impact
on our state. DuPont Delisle has a cancer cluster around it that is in the top 10% of rates of cancer in the country (“Sierra”). The Sierra Club Chronicles’ film on DuPont Delisle documents some 2,000 people who have filed lawsuits against DuPont alleging pollution from this facility has harmed their health (“Sierra”). I left GCRL, in 1980, thoroughly disillusioned by how often the lab obtained contracts from private industry and then carried out toxicity testing that showed the industry did no harm. I had assisted Dr. Adrien Lawler, the head of experimental organism culture. We would raise and deliver crops of healthy organisms of the exact same age (two day old mysid shrimp for instance) to Dr. William Walker, who would expose the organisms to various amounts of toxins or effluent to test if these various chemicals were harmful or fatal to the test animals. Many times test animals would die. But even when they lived, it was disturbing to see how toxic some of the effluents we received from industry actually were. Dr. Walker would confer with industry, and test findings would eventually satisfy EPA regulations. To my knowledge, the EPA was only informed of tests that fell within EPA-accepted limits, and was never notified of any of the tests that killed off organisms. I have to admit that all this may have been perfectly honest, but, especially after the firings of Dr. Venkhataramiah and his staff, it didn’t feel that way to me at the time. I may have been removed from the actual testing, but I helped sacrifice many marine organisms to assure that Mississippi industries met EPA guidelines.

Anyway, I left Gulf Coast Research Lab in 1980, feeling that I might do more in some other way to save the habitat and ecology I cared so much about. In 1985, I married Jeanne Lebow, who works as hard as I do to save the planet, and we moved to Hattiesburg where she completed her Ph.D. in English, and I was flunked out of the USM art department. Soon after we arrived, we learned of Sierra Club meetings at nearby William Carey College and joined. We became involved in the battle to stop the Mississippi State Highway Department from destroying the best part of the M.M. Roberts Nature Preserve. This section, part of the botanically rich Ragland Hills preserve near Hattiesburg, was not in the path of the widening
of US Highway 98, but the Highway Department insisted it must be bulldozed and the dirt under the nature preserve used to fill in under the widened US 98 (“Herbarium”). We got into the fight too late: the Highway Department won even as the Southern District Highway Commissioner at the time went to jail for some malfeasance. It was an appropriate welcome to politics and environmental movement in Mississippi.

Jeanne and I were out of country and out of state with her professorial work for several years, so battles to stop a canal from being dredged in the Pascagoula River were fought by others. The Pascagoula River, the last “wild” or unregulated, major river in the lower 48 states, is the crown jewel of the Mississippi Gulf Coast ecosystem. The proposed canal would have allowed coal to be barged up to the Mississippi Power coal-fired “Plant Daniel” in Escatawpa. Others succeeded in stopping this, but it was a bittersweet victory for local enviros. The planned canal was defeated in part because the coal was being delivered at a higher price by Mississippi Export Railroad, a train line that had only one customer, Mississippi Power. Rail delivery was profitable for select, well-connected local citizens--this was widely understood at the time--and they might profit less if barges delivered the coal. Since the wealthy elite benefited from train cars delivering coal, this helped kill the dredging of the Pascagoula River swamp.

Another battle finishing up as Jeanne and I returned to Mississippi in 1991 concerned the plan to hollow the Richton Salt Dome so that it could store nuclear waste. After that proposal ran into opposition, the salt dome was declared a depository for oil as part of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. To hollow out the Richton Dome for oil storage would require the diversion of millions of gallons of water from the repeatedly-threatened, ecologically-invaluable Pascagoula River. This water would be pressurized and used to clean out the salt dome, resulting in the production of vast amounts of toxic salty slurry. This slurry would then have to be piped through environmentally-sensitive wetlands to the Gulf, south of the Mississippi Sound, where it would raise water salinity and threaten marine life. Between 1991 and
the present time, we have held this fantastically destructive plan at bay, but we can never really say that we’ve won. As I was told many years ago, no environmental battle is ever won, only delayed. Recently, plans were revived to store nuclear waste at Richton, with Governor Bryant endorsing it and even suggesting that Mississippi could treat and store all the nuclear waste in the United States and be a world leader in that field (“Mississippi”). Even anti-regulation conservatives can see a problem with this idea. But it certainly isn’t settled in our favor. We must remain vigilant and ready to oppose it whenever it comes up again in a concrete form.

Around this time in the history of the Gulf Coast Sierra Club group, the early 1990s, Becky Gillette became group chair. There never has been and probably will never be a better leader for our group, though I keep hoping another woman will step up sometime soon. Becky took the reins from Bill Kulick, who held us together, but didn’t resist every ecocidal permit application and useless development scheme. Becky did. She was ferocious, and tireless, and ingenious, and smart, etc. When another leader like that comes along, I will resign in a heartbeat!

Our first big battle under Becky was to oppose the creation of a second sulfuric acid waste mound in east Jackson County by the Mississippi Phosphate Company, probably the all-round worst-polluting industry on our coast. The plant receives rock phosphate from Morocco and is allowed to lose thousands of pounds of this material per day at the docks as it arrives. Rock phosphate turns Bayou Cassotte lime green in the summer time and regularly kills fish that float up and are disposed of by the truck load. The manufacturing process requires adding sulfuric acid to the rock to strip away the phosphates to make fertilizer; this results in acidic ponds, and humid, acidic air that is carried by the wind, eating off the aluminum vanes on air conditioning units in nearby industries and residences, often affecting paint on houses and autos, and no doubt being breathed in for unhealthy outcomes. The dust around the plant can cause pulmonary fibrosis, along with elevated cancer rates.
Becky led us into battle at the Planning Commission for Jackson County where we actually got the commission to reject the burial of another 200 acres of Jackson County under a 140 foot tall stack of spent sulfuric acid waste, or “gypsum.” Despite the innocuous name, gypsum cannot ever be moved because it’s inherently radioactive, so the Club argued that a second mound would be bad for future economic activity in the county, and it worked. Of course, we won partly because Mississippi Phosphate officials didn’t expect any opposition to their request for another “waste mountain.”

After being turned down by the Planning Commission, Mississippi Phosphate appealed the decision to the Board of Supervisors, who then overruled the Planning Commission and allowed the siting of the waste mound. This happened for two reasons, first, because the phosphate plant ordered all 200 of their employees to attend the Board of Supervisors meeting. Second, the supervisors approved the mound because the head of the Nature Conservancy came to the meeting to claim that the second waste mound would be good for the environment of Jackson County!

Mississippi Phosphate executives promised the Nature Conservancy hundreds of acres of land to manage if the head of the Conservancy would appeal to the Board in favor of the waste mound. This situation made environmental groups appear divided on whether the waste mountain was good or bad. Right after the mound was approved, however, Mississippi Phosphate reneged on the agreement with the Nature Conservancy. The Conservancy lost, Sierra Club lost, the mound was built, the people of Jackson County lost. It’s worth noting that Mississippi Phosphate recently went bankrupt and abandoned those huge piles of toxic gypsum. The EPA is currently processing about 2,000,000 gallons of toxic runoff a day from those piles. At the time, back in the 1990’s, about the best we could do was console ourselves because when we lost we had been on the moral side, didn’t sell our souls, or make deals that ended up poisoning our water and air. We learned from this struggle and moved on to another, but the poison kept pouring; even today, it pours.
Around the time of the Mississippi Phosphate battle, Becky led a fight to limit a landfill in near Menge Road in Harrison County that was receiving millions of pounds of New Orleans garbage every day. This fight resulted in the landfill not expanding beyond a previously established limit, and I assume by now it has been capped and closed. Neighbors had been smelling bad odors and rightfully feared that their property values were going down. One of the residents a few miles away happened to be Deborah Dawkins, who Becky recruited into the Sierra Club. Deborah served on our state board and then decided that she could run for state office. She did, and she won. She became a state senator and is holding that office today. I attribute Deborah’s political success partly to Becky Gillette, who recruited her into our group. From that platform, Deborah saw a way for her to represent the people of her district. She stands today as one of our leading public officials when it comes to environmental matters.

Another successful battle Becky led in Jackson County’s industrial area was the Osco-Laidlaw toxic waste incinerator proposal. This industry was going to employ so few people and release so many toxics to the already badly polluted atmosphere that the public rose up and almost unanimously agreed it was a bad idea. The Board of Supervisors had to back-pedal their position and buy the land back from this corporation. It was one time when the public was so up in arms that the politicians truly feared the voters. At the time, we joked that they probably stopped this plan to prevent a public hearing that anticipated 5000 attendees. The Supervisors probably feared that level of participation so much that the question of whether or not Osco-Laidlaw was a good idea didn’t enter into their thinking.

One of the fights Becky led us into which had a very positive outcome—even as the issue continues to resurface and never permanently ends—is the effort to protect wetlands around Turkey Creek and the historic African-American community in Gulfport. Over the years the people of Turkey Creek had weathered a veritable epidemic of water pollution, flooding and ecocidal development schemes; sewer lines crossing their lands—which they weren’t allowed
to hook into; wetland fills all around them, which increased flooding during periodic heavy rain events; and degraded water quality in the creek, which lowered their quality of life and property values. Sierra Club joined the fight when one developer in particular, Butch Ward, attempted to fill and pave his hundreds of acres, not caring whether or not that the increased rainfall runoff worsened flooding in Turkey Creek. Our help in these struggles bonded us to the community, helped the Sierra Club to be more welcoming and attractive to people of color, and helped save the community from flooding due to uncontrolled paving of lands that naturally absorb and mitigate rains and floods. Turkey Creek today is managed by the community as a conservation area regulated to prevent littering, dumping, or dredging. Although their homes are periodically threatened with flooding, at least the effort to stop uncontrolled wetland fills has saved this community from hopeless ruin and allowed it to persist into the near future.

During the late ‘90’s and early 2000’s, Becky led Sierra Club opposition to wetland fills, dirt pits, small scale and neighborhood problems, while at the same time opposing large scale projects that threatened our water, air and land: Chevron emission and expansion permits; permits proposed for polluting industries; deforestation; channelization, and sewer system expansions that degraded water quality. Becky led us against septic tanks that were dumping straight into local waterways. She fought, unsuccessfully, to stop the Port of Gulfport filling in the Mississippi Sound to expand parking lots for trailers full of frozen chickens prior to loading them onto ships. Anyone in Gulfport following Hurricane Katrina could testify to how that worked out! Katrina’s storm surge delivered hundreds of tons of rotten chicken meat into downtown and West Gulfport neighborhoods, adding exponentially to the misery the flooding and destruction caused. As far as I’m concerned, as her replacement since 2006 or thereabouts, she did the impossible, and only another woman as dedicated and able to spend the hours she spent could possibly fill her shoes.

I also must remember Paula Vassey, a member who worked hardest for us from around 2000 to the summer of 2009 when she died.
of congestive heart failure. Paula taught herself about environmental issues, learned the rules for wetland management (knowing what could and could not be filled in), understood the process for objecting to small projects in neighborhoods, commented at hearings with data and a knowledge of rules which made her that much more effective, while also pleading on behalf of the harm to people and wildlife and ecosystems. She spoke tirelessly at scoping meetings, public comments sessions and state and county board and commission meeting of every type, on aquaculture projects, industrial expansions, and on air and water permits. For example, early in the last decade, I found “Brazilian water fern” in Bayou Pierre in Gautier, an invasive species not known previously to be in Pascagoula River waters. I told Paula, who notified the state, and although this invasive is not eradicated, at least it is on the state’s radar, the first step toward eradication, hopefully without poisoning native plants or ecosystems. Paula could reach who needed to be reached and make them react.

And when Paula died and I was early in my tenure as group chair, I let it be known that we were handicapped and in need of someone to take Paula’s place. That’s when Linda St. Martin came aboard, and if it is possible, she was more effective even than Paula was. Linda’s great battles were against the Kemper County lignite-fired boondoggle of a power plant, and she also got out the word on what was needed to save our way of life when the BP oil spill (2010) threatened our very existence on the coast.

A highlight of Linda’s advocacy to save our coast from the oil spill was when she attended a hearing in Hancock County where Hailey Barbour, the governor, came to reassure us that all was well. Linda stood up and contradicted his position, revealing that fishermen were thrown out of work, oil was inside the Mississippi Sound, and that the smell of burning oil was coming ashore and impacting tourism. Barbour apparently put Linda on a list to be arrested, because that’s what happened when she attended another hearing, this time in Ocean Springs. She was seated in an auditorium talking to friends when her laughter attracted an Ocean Springs policeman. The meeting had not
even started when Linda laughed, and this slight outburst resulted in her arrest. She was handcuffed and taken to the Ocean Springs Police Station, missing the entire meeting. She spent the rest of her life wondering if she would be convicted since a judge heard the case a few months after her arrest but no ruling was ever made. She died in May 2013, from a resurgence of polio, the case against her (“disturbing the peace”) still pending.

I can’t write all that could be said of Linda’s activism. She was the perfect community organizer; she peopled our events by staying on the phone and getting people to come. She interviewed brilliantly, passionately on television, radio and in newspapers and always called attention to our battles. She organized buses to Kemper County numerous times to protest the Kemper boondoggle. She predicted Kemper would cost $7 billion dollars. As we speak, in February 2017, her estimate is right on target. Her tireless agitation, her “disturbing the peace”, made our legal case against the Kemper scam that much more successful. And as a result, Gulf Restoration Network and Sierra Club law suits—filed and argued expertly by attorney Robert Wiygul—were able to wring concessions from Mississippi Power, converting Gulfport’s Plant Watson, as well as two Alabama coal-fired plants, to natural gas so that we have less airborne particulate pollution in our area. A recent report from the Gulf indicates that the drop in mercury in large fish is measurable and attributes the decrease to fewer coal-fired power plants.

I’ll finish this reminiscence with our most visible current battle to save the Pascagoula River. George County was almost permitted to build a $100 million (estimated cost) pair of dams on two vitally important Pascagoula tributaries—Big and Little Cedar Creeks-- to make 2800 acres of lakes which supposedly could be used as “drought resiliency” remediation by delivering stored water to the lower Pascagoula during droughts. The problem with that is that if there were a drought, the lakes would dry up along with the river. In addition, George County would zone the lake shores for recreational and residential economic development as well. Many people concerned
with the Pascagoula River commented on the permit and the poorly-reasoned Environmental Assessment, which resulted in the Army Corps of Engineers turning down the application.

George County then was ordered to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), an exhaustive $3.5 million assessment of the biology of the area, including intensive searches by qualified biologists to inventory plants and animals. In addition, there would be more-thorough evaluations of downstream impacts, and geologists and biologists would be employed to determine the feasibility of the proposal and structural requirements. Endangered or threatened species—such as the Louisiana Black Bear, Gulf of Mexico Sturgeon, Yellow-Blotched Sawback Turtle, Florida Manatee, Alabama Shad, Pearl Darter, and Louisiana Quillwort—could be negatively impacted. Therefore, each species must be specifically addressed in an EIS. The very question of water retention also must be resolved since soils under the lakes are known to lack enough clay content to prevent the water leaking into lower strata, making any filling of the lakes problematic. And so we are preparing for the first round of hearings as George County and the dam-building organization known as the Pat Harrison Waterway District team up to attempt to withhold flow from the largest free-flowing river in the lower 48 states. We are finding our allies, spreading the word, and hoping for overwhelming turnout at the scoping meeting scheduled on January 24, 2017, at the beginning of this Environmental Impact Process. We will do what we always do, oppose destruction and try to save the best of Mississippi’s natural heritage for future generations.

Members of the Coast Group of the Mississippi Sierra Club continue to fight many battles at once—often losing, but with a few notable victories. That is part of trying to save the natural world in a state that is mostly managed by opponents of natural ecosystems, clean air, earth and water. But it is a necessary fight which we will do with or without the likes of Becky, Paula, Linda and all the others who came before us. We welcome anyone willing to help us and we always help those who reach out to us if we can. Learn from my experience, fight
the good fight, pass on what you learn . . . and never stop fighting!

Works Cited

