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AMERICA'S WETLAND FOUNDATION COMPLETES ITS MISSION

From a 'Football Field of Land Lost Each Hour' to the World Delta Dialogues, Foundation Puts Coastal Land Loss Issues on the Map of Public Consciousness

The America's WETLAND Foundation (AWF) announced today that it is ceasing operations after nearly two decades of creating a sea change in public and policy-maker awareness of coastal wetland loss, its impacts, and the urgent need to address it.

The impact of the body of work and dedication of AWF's team and partners continually exceeded everyone's expectations, according to board chair, King Milling, who also chairs the Governor's Advisory Commission on Coastal Protection and Restoration. "The task was to mobilize Louisiana citizens and elevate this issue to a top priority and this was accomplished ten-fold."

The Foundation was created in 2002 in response to then-Governor Mike Foster's call to action. Through recommendations by a special state task force on the need to broaden public awareness of the land loss crisis in Louisiana and support good public policy to address it, AWF developed the *Campaign to Save Coastal Louisiana*.

The research-based public engagement efforts by the Foundation led to groundbreaking communications strategies, including establishing metaphors like "losing a football field of land each hour" to coastal erosion in the public vernacular, as a means of gaining critical mass and connecting the public to the enormity of the issue. More than 60 national and international awards for public awareness, partnerships, media, communications, print, broadcast, and electronic advertising are witness to the deep impact of AWF. Among the awards are the Public Service Campaign of the Year by PR News and Silver Anvil Award and the Public Relations Society of America's "Communicator of the Year."

"Because of the urgency of the threat, we had to use every trick in the book and then invent some," Val Marmillion, AWF's managing director, said. "We started out with barely 20% of Louisiana voters recognizing the issue as important and in less than five years, we moved the needle to 81% with a majority of residents citing coastal restoration as the issue of their lifetime."

Louisiana has long attempted to demonstrate the value of the Mississippi River delta and contiguous coastal areas to the nation. Through professional targeting, branding, and messaging, the Foundation converted public attitudes, often building on satire as with AWF's

initial public service campaign, “Don't be a big loser,” highlighting ties to everyday life that would be impacted by loss of the wetlands.

“Once Hurricane Katrina hit, the Foundation had established coastal wetland loss in the media’s mind,” Sidney Coffee, then director of Louisiana’s Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority and later, senior advisor to AWF, said. “The value of coastal wetlands became part of the story when before AWF’s ongoing campaign, the relationship of healthy wetlands to community resiliency was pretty much unknown.”

As Louisiana fell silent during the aftermath of the storm, the Foundation served as a triage for communications from its D.C. offices, reminding news sources that wetland restoration was critical for protecting coastal communities. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita helped cement that important lesson. “It was so gratifying that the national press was asking the right questions and putting the issues together. I remember thinking, wow, the last five years of beating the drum on the issue has paid off,” Coffee said. “It was a light in the darkness of such a devastating time.”

AWF has often been likened to the bell cow, leading and pushing the envelope to suggest a new way to address issues. Most valuable was its work as a neutral convener, providing elasticity in the dialogue between environmental and energy sector advocates. One of the first climate change forums was held by the Foundation in Mobile, Alabama in 2010, well before the issue came to daily headlines.

AWF also hosted the groundbreaking series of 11 leadership hearings across the Gulf Coast to introduce the concept of resiliency in 2011, an idea that now resonates with the government and the private sector. AWF partnered with Entergy on the hearings, who had financed a seminal study, drawing information from every Gulf coastal zip code to determine the threats of sea level rise to built infrastructure. A report entitled “Beyond Unintended Consequences” was based on the outcomes and findings from the forums and study. In 2010 and 2013, the Foundation joined with the Government of the Netherlands to host the World Delta Dialogues in New Orleans and two years later in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, the latter of which issued a compact of cooperation to address wetland loss worldwide.

A lingering issue of connecting the delta to the rest of America was addressed as AWF convened “The Big River Works” in 2015. In six regional forums in the watershed, AWF sought strategic cooperation for sustaining the Mississippi River system, engaging a diverse coalition of interests with a common stake in ensuring a healthy, working river. Featured cities were New Orleans, Memphis, St. Louis, Minneapolis, and Chicago, with policy objectives presented in Washington, DC. In all, AWF has convened more than fifty forums and conferences and reports from those events have become an important part of restoration literature and knowledge.

Each of these strategies fulfilled one of the key aims of the Foundation to serve as a fountainhead of ideas and spin-off efforts that would grow a constituency to influence support for wetland restoration. All AWF products involved building on a communications portfolio that, in the end, have gained widespread coverage, trillions of media impressions and millions of social media and web visits.

Inspiring more than 70,000 volunteer hours in cooperation with AmeriCorps, supplementing educational resources with arts, math, science, and technology competitions, or supporting advocacy by hosting visiting media or public officials, each strategy gained support for working to save coastal wetlands.

AWF's leadership in drawing the connection between a strong environment and the economy has spurred a growing national coalition of organizations, which view coastal conservation and restoration as key to a secure national economy and energy security.

The Foundation also maintained a strong portfolio of projects at the community level, including a shoreline restoration project to demonstrate the effectiveness and cost-efficiency through using innovation and recycled products, completed in record time and at a fraction of the cost of most shoreline restorations. It followed this venture in partnership with Resource Environmental Services and BHP with two projects to plant 35,000 Bald Cypress and re-establish biodiversity in a region devastated by coastal erosion.

Most recently, the Foundation has built on its experience to establish a process to address communities threatened by sea level rise. As a final act, AWF established an initiative for adaptation that can result in a community self-identifying as a *Sea Level Rise Community of Innovation*. The designation will telegraph that communities are creating solutions by working with nature to establish a long-term future around living with water and building in ways that take advantage of natural resources that have supported populations for generations. Through taking action to adapt to climate change impacts and communicating those actions, coastal communities can help save home values and, ultimately, the local tax base.

"It is gratifying to reach this milestone and sunset - AWF can conclude its work by offering hope and confidence to those who will prepare coastal communities for future generations. The Foundation's successes are the pride of thousands who joined the effort, making AWF the most trusted source of information on restoring the coast." Marmillion said. "We have always known that the path to right the wrongs that have caused coastal land loss and climate change, resulting in sea level rise, must include treating Mother Nature with a kinder hand."

Marmillion concluded, "The hard work ahead will require the disruption of old ways into a new normal that embraces valuing our natural resources and the innovation needed to meet the biggest challenge of our lives."

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