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War brews over nature's wonder;
Caddo Lake: water source for city or untouchable treasure?

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UNCERTAIN, Texas - Holley Noon threads her canoe through a labyrinth of cypress knees, nutria nests and beaver lodges. The boat edges from the twilight murk into dazzling open water, and ducks startled by the splash of paddles rise by the hundreds in an incandescent whirl.

Modern-day Texas is only a few miles away. But on the hidden backwater of **Caddo Lake** known as the Eagles Nest, the distance feels like centuries.

"Every time I go around one of these bends, looking out through the cypress and the Spanish moss, I can almost see the Indians still paddling their canoes up in here," she said. "Somehow, the time just stops at Caddo."

The semi-retired teacher from Longview fell for **Caddo Lake** more than 50 years ago, and she and her husband now rarely miss a weekend there. For Mrs. Noon, Caddo is like a beloved old family friend, an eccentric and ever-changing character whose stories are passed down like heirlooms and whose secrets must be earned.

"I like to say it's my favorite place of all the places I've ever been and all the places I've never been," she said. "There's just not any other place like it. You get to know it, to love it. You get to be very possessive and you don't want to have anybody doing anything to bother it or do anything to hurt it. I call it my lake. It is my lake."

It's a claim shared with equal passion by unlettered fishermen and Ph.D.s, conservative oilmen and environmentalist rock stars, fourth-generation swamp rats and wealthy urban refugees.

"It's mystical. It's not just beautiful. It's beyond the ability of us poor mortals to put the words to it," said Richard Bartlett, vice chairman of Mary Kay Cosmetics and a part-time Caddo resident. "That lake does something to you. ... This is the dimension that is hard to write about, for scientists to get into, for business people to get into. I know of no

one who has really been there, who has spent any time on that lake, who is not affected beyond words."

Advocates, scientists and officials alike say the state's only naturally formed lake has also spawned unparalleled environmental fights. Pitched battles over the last 30 years have centered on a still-unresolved question: Could Caddo be used to benefit neighboring businesses and cities, or should the one lake in Texas not built by man - a fragile ecosystem hailed as one of the world's most significant wetlands - simply be left alone?

The latest brawl began when leaders in nearby Marshall sought state permission to sell water from Caddo's Big Cypress Creek watershed to a new power plant or other industry. The city has been allowed to take water for drinking supplies since 1947.

Texas Natural Resource and Conservation Commission Executive Director Jeff Saitas approved the request March 15. He said his agency could not consider potential effects of more than doubling the amount of water Marshall takes daily from the watershed because the city has owned rights to the water for almost 50 years.

Marshall officials say they don't believe the lake will be hurt by a plan that could increase the city's water intake from about 2.5 billion gallons to more than 5.2 billion gallons a year. But they acknowledge that they have no scientific data.

"We're only taking the tiniest fraction of what's flowing by," said City Manager Frank Johnson. "The lake faces a much greater threat just from simple evaporation."

Five years of water sampling for the natural resource commission's clean rivers program by East Texas Baptist University biology professor Roy Darville suggests otherwise. His measurements through January 2002 show the lake's dissolved oxygen levels have dropped significantly while acidity has jumped, along with levels of nitrates that fuel Caddo's excessive plant growth.

'Very fast aging'

On summer days when lake levels fall and water no longer pours over the spillway - the time when Marshall pumps so much water that locals say they commonly see Big Cypress Creek run backward - dissolved oxygen crucial to the lake's aquatic life drops 24 percent.

"The lake's health is declining faster than I would've expected. It's a very fast aging of the lake," Dr. Darville said. "The key to me, in my opinion, is getting more water in the lake, creating a flow-through environment. The water is stagnating, and that really causes poor water quality."

Lake advocates and residents contend that Marshall's plan was poorly conceived, never properly evaluated and poses a significant threat to an already ailing lake.

Federal fish and wildlife experts publicly echoed those concerns, and officials with the state's Parks and Wildlife Department cautioned in writing that Mr. Saitas' decision against scientific evaluation or a public hearing violated state law.

An unlikely array of lake advocates has since vowed to challenge the decision.

"There are lots of people out there who are putting the boxing gloves on," said Marshall Jones, a Shreveport, La., environmental lawyer and third-generation owner of

one of the lake's largest shoreline tracts. "The city of Marshall and the TNRCC have not had the fight they're going to have in a very long time."

Among those gearing up are Eagles singer and Linden, Texas, native Don Henley; a Fort Worth investment lawyer who once was a partner with President Bush in the Texas Rangers; and a **Dallas** oilman who has contributed \$ 100,000 to Gov. Rick Perry's election campaign.

"The city of Marshall and some of its citizens do not realize that they're custodians of something wonderful for everyone. And the length that people who do appreciate it will go to protect something that valuable and important is very great," said Albert Huddleston, the **Dallas** oilman.

Mr. Huddleston hired an array of well-connected political, legal and media consultants last fall to try to resolve the issue and has now told the same team to prepare for a legal war.

"That's a wonderful tenet that people, particularly in Texas, have - the willingness to step forward and protect things and people who appear not to be defended," Mr. Huddleston said, adding that his only interest in Caddo is a "very personal" sense of responsibility for ensuring its future. "I look at taking water away from **Caddo Lake** the same way that someone would look at putting a pipe into the Alamo and sucking it out brick by brick."

Time capsule of Texas

Lake supporters say the Alamo comparison isn't much of a stretch; Caddo is a remarkably complete time capsule of Texas history.

The name Texas derives from the Caddo Indian word tejas, or friend. A steamboat route through the lake made Jefferson the state's biggest port well into the second half of the 19th century, and canals that slaves cut by hand through the cypress thickets are still passable today.

In the no man's land of primeval swamps and sloughs spanning the Texas-Louisiana border, rival bands of settlers called themselves "the regulators" and "the moderators" and waged the Republic of Texas' own civil war. Among the casualties was the Republic's navy secretary.

One of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' first efforts to control and improve natural stream navigation - and one of its earliest disasters - came when engineers assigned to open up Caddo's natural log dam blasted through it and drained the lake. Years later, the corps restored the lake by building a dam at Mooringsport, La.

The predecessor to Gulf Oil Co. drilled the world's first offshore oil well at Caddo decades before the East Texas oil boom. When the East Texas field hit big, the legendary Texas Ranger who tamed it, Manuel T. "Lone Wolf" Gonzauillas, built a cabin retreat still standing on the north shore. On another secluded part of the lake, Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow regularly hid out from the law.

Wildlife's refuge

Panthers still roam the lake's remote backwaters, and rare wood storks and bald eagles nest in cypress trees dating back to the first European explorers.

The mix of history and archetypal wildness breeds a peculiar populism. Asked to explain their love of Caddo, some of the lake's most affluent, well-traveled regulars talk dreamily of fishing with cane poles from a battered johnboat or getting lost in the swamps overnight - a fate wryly known to locals as "checking in to the Caddo hotel."

"Everybody basically seeks the same level once they get here. I guess the lake really takes over, just kind of puts everybody in a melting pot," said fishing guide Billy Carter. "You come down here, you're laid back, you're just watching the wind blow and the waves."

Land preservationists and scientists say Caddo also routinely makes wetlands experts gush.

"There isn't another place like it," said Shaun Hamilton, who oversaw a Texas Nature Conservancy project in the late '80s to help the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department buy up and permanently preserve more than 6,000 acres of the lake's most critical wetlands. "I've had biologists from Florida and Louisiana that came and looked at this area and said this was a lot better than the Okefenokee Swamp. This looks more like Louisiana than Louisiana."

But he and others say that uniqueness also may be its weakness.

"The rest of the lakes in Texas are man-made, and the lines of authority are very clear," said Jim Neal, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist who worked for more than a decade at Caddo. He says there is no such authority at Caddo, adding, "That fits in with the whole historical context of **Caddo Lake** being a no man's land settled by people during the wild and woolly days."

Without a local, state or federal overseer to protect the lake, study it systematically and use resulting data to develop a management plan, he and others say, Caddo is an open target for development schemes.

Scientists say that with little data quantifying its complex ecology and hydrology, it is difficult to sort out what the lake can live with and what might kill it.

"No one has ever modeled this lake," said Dr. Darville. "For instance, the lake is filling in very quickly. No one has studied that, and no one has measured it."

"We take it for granted that it's always going to be there. And I think all the lake people are saying, 'Wait a minute, let's talk about this. Let's consider what might happen. Let's have some real studies,'" he said. "No one owns the lake, and someone's got to take charge."

Grass-roots effort

The **Caddo Lake** Institute, founded by Mr. Henley, is working with lake residents and supporters to develop a grass-roots management clearinghouse for the lake. Lake advocates and others say the latest Caddo brawl may be the catalyst for such management efforts and other badly needed scientific help.

"In some ways, this may lead to positive improvement," said Walt Sears, director of the Northeast Texas Water Supply District. The agency manages water resources in the Cypress Basin that include **Caddo and Lake** O' the Pines.

"The ecosystem at Caddo is so important and so unique that we don't need to be using it as a water supply source," he said. "The supply is so ample in the man-made lakes in this region, it is not necessary to put the environmental uniqueness at risk.

"It's not necessary to say which comes first, people or fish. There's enough water in our basin to satisfy all the needs if we'll just be responsible," Mr. Sears said. "With more study, more scrutiny, maybe Caddo will get a better shake out of the deal in the future, with more attention to exactly what's going on."

Caddo's defenders say the only certainty is that they won't back down from any fight.

"We're hardheaded," said Uncertain Mayor Betty Holder, who has lived at the lake for 15 years and has fished it for 35. "A lot of things you can take money and replace. You can't replace what we have. ... Being as shallow as we are, it would be very easy to destroy **Caddo Lake**. We didn't buy it. We didn't make it. The man upstairs did, and we're going to keep trying to take care of it the best we can."

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