

# The Times

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SHREVEPORT ■ BOSSIER CITY ■ ARK-LA-TEX

## Caddo Lake: Endangered jewel

■ Concerns range from pollution to overdevelopment.

By REEVES FEILD  
The Times

Pete Rose lives along the shores of upper Caddo Lake, where largemouth bass grow fat feeding on sunfish and shad.

He loves casting for them on quiet backwaters where blue herons stalk the shorelines for minnows and other baitfish and an occasional alligator is spotted lurking in the shadows of moss-draped cypress.

Rose also likes to eat the fish he catches. But if those bass come from the Texas side of Caddo Lake, he might think about throwing them back. Tests have shown that some fish carry dangerously high levels of mercury.

### Inside

■ Life on the lake, 4A

■ Proposed poultry plant, 5A

■ Burgeoning eco-

Mercury contamination is one of several environmental problems plaguing Caddo. More than fish in the skillet is at stake.

Government officials and entrepreneurs

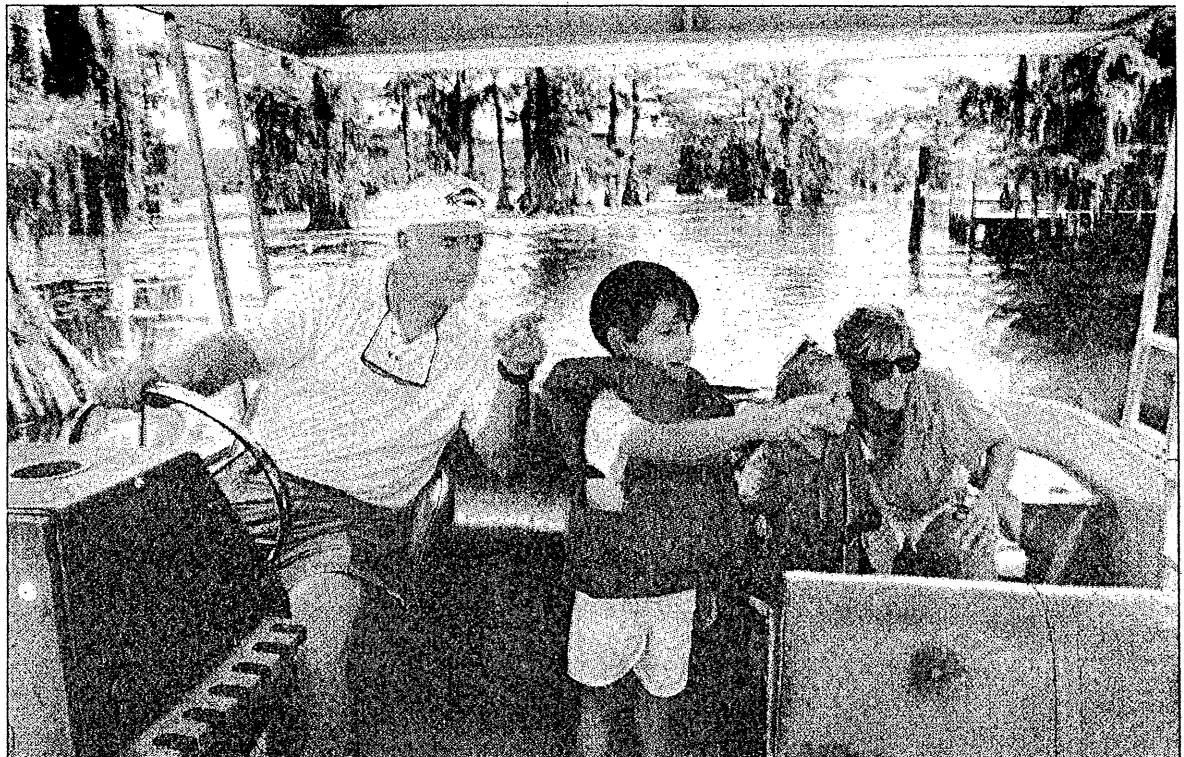
would like to see the unique wetland develop as a focal point for the growing "ecotourism" market. The lake itself is the backup water source for Shreveport.

"I'm torn," said marina owner Rod Hines. "I like for people to come look at the resource and then leave with it still untouched."

The threat to Caddo Lake is mostly threefold:

■ No one is sure where the mercury is coming from, but levels are high enough that the Texas Department of Health has issued an advisory against eating too many largemouth bass or freshwater drum caught on the west side of the lake.

■ The old Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant at Karnack, Texas, now virtually inactive, has been declared a federal



The Times/KIM HUGHES

Rod Hines, owner of Shady Glade Marina in Uncertain, Texas, points out a great blue heron to Trevor (second from left) and

Avery Mack and their mom, Joely. The Mack family is from Austin, Texas, and had never been on a tour of Caddo Lake.

*"This is the most polluted lake in East Texas. I'm not the kind of environmentalist that marches on Austin, but we have to focus attention on these problems if they're going to be solved."*

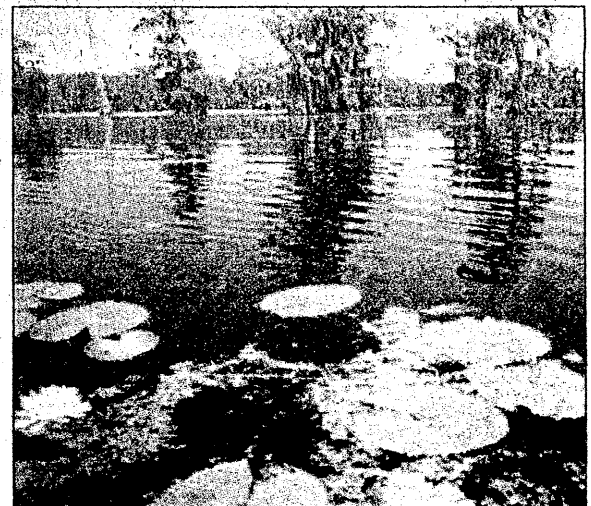
Bill Clinkscale, Caddo Lake area resident

Superfund site. A degreasing agent called trichloroethylene (TCE) has migrated from a landfill into the groundwater and been detected in nearby Harrison Bayou, which flows into Caddo. So far, it hasn't apparently reached the lake.

■ Farther upstream, poultry giant Pilgrim's Pride wants to build a chicken processing plant near Pittsburg, Texas. The plant would dump an estimated 2.5 million gallons of wastewater

per day into Big Cypress Creek, which flows into Lake O' the Pines and eventually into Caddo. The permit application unleashed a flood of letters to the Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission, which will rule on the request some time this fall.

"It's a constant fight," said Bill Clinkscale, who lives along Big



■ Please see PEOPLE, 5A Water lilies grow in the Clinton Lake area of Caddo.

CADDO LAKE: ENDANGERED JEWEL

# 'People just assume it's going to stay this way'

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Cypress Bayou on the upper end of Caddo Lake. "This is the most polluted lake in East Texas. I'm not the kind of environmentalist that marches on Austin, but we have to focus attention on these problems, if they're going to be solved."

A more immediate issue, says Clinkscale, is residential sewage disposal. Many of the systems in use around the lake are old and outdated, and septic tanks often go underwater during seasonal flooding.

Clinkscale motored up through Carter's Lake, Old House Slough and Clinton Lake while showing off some of Caddo's more scenic backwater areas, the spot where he caught and released a lunker bass weighing more than 6 pounds last spring.

"This is one of the prettiest places in the state," he said while following the well-marked boat road through a cathedral of towering cypress trees — some of them hundreds of years old.

The flowering water lilies were just beginning to bloom. Beaver huts were built all along the way, housing one of the many species of wildlife that live there. Graceful egrets and herons took wing whenever Clinkscale came too near.

"People just assume it's going to stay this way. But if we don't do a little something to help Momma Nature, we're going to lose it," he said.



Clinkscale

Musician Don Henley of the Eagles grew up in East Texas and fished on Caddo as a youngster. He became involved in preserving the lake back when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was studying the feasibility of the so-called Daingerfield Reach.

"The Big Ditch," as the project was referred to by its critics, would have extended commercial navigation from the Red River up Twelve-Mile Bayou and through some of the lake's most sensitive natural areas, perhaps at great environmental cost.

After the corps suspended its feasibility study, attention shifted to the development of ecotourism as a means of capitalizing on Caddo's scenic beauty. Norm Presson and his wife, Pat, operate Mossy Brake Lodge — one of several bed and breakfasts to open at Uncertain, Texas.

"Caddo's ecosystem is one of only 15 sites designated as a wetland of international importance," Norm Presson said. "The lake has become an important tourist area. If we don't keep it clean and natural so that the people who come in here have a pristine swamp to enjoy, then it will be hard to get them back."

Some of those who come take lake excursions offered by David Lomax, who runs Caddo Canoe Rental and Boat Tours at the Caddo State Park near Karnack.

"People are tired of going to theme parks," Lomax said. "They want to get outside and relax. The reactions I get when they first see Caddo Lake range from 'awesome' to 'outstanding' to 'I don't believe this is Texas.' For that to continue, we have to take care of it."



A turtle sunbathes near the shore of Caddo Lake.

In recent months, the mercury issue and the cleanup at Longhorn have been moved to the back burner as the controversy over the poultry plant heated up.

Below its proposed discharge sit Lake O' the Pines and Caddo, both water sources for communities in Northeast Texas and Northwest Louisiana.

Shreveport water officials so far are taking a wait-and-see attitude.

"We're trying to keep abreast of everything," said Wes Wyche, environmental affairs manager for the Shreveport Department of Water and Sewerage. "At present, we take (Caddo) water out of Twelve-Mile Bayou when Cross Lake is low, and we have the ability to pump from the lake itself. But a lot of the concerns are about our future water supply."

Wyche says opposition to the poultry plant from cities like Longview, Texas, which expects to begin pumping water from Lake O' the Pines in the next few years, will address any concerns Shreveport might have. But environmentalists take a somewhat broader view.

"This is a link in a chain that is going to have a lot of repercussions," said Murray Lloyd of Shreveport, chairman of the Kisatchie Sierra Club. "You can't do something upstream and not impact the whole watershed."

"We want to protect the values of Caddo Lake," said Shreveport architect Bill Wiener of the Uncertain Audubon Society, which has been at the forefront of several environmental battles at Caddo Lake. "It is an irreplaceable asset, and we're talking about potential health problems."

The same is true of the mercury advisory on the Texas side of Caddo. Strangely, there are no such warnings on the lower half of the border lake, where Louisiana's Department of Environmental Quality sampled fish populations extensively and found mercury well within acceptable levels.

One explanation is that the backwaters on the Texas side of the lake are shallower and more acidic, with an abundance of organic material. These conditions are favorable to the creation of methylmercury.

Henry Lewis, 58, has been guiding visiting anglers on upper Caddo Lake for more than 40 years. As for the mercury advisory,



Pete Rose (left), a Caddo Lake area resident, fishes there with Tim Rose Jr. and Tim Rose Sr., both of Arkansas.

he said people are continuing to eat the fish they catch there.

"It shook up some of them at first, but now most don't pay it no attention. I think it's a bunch of talk. We eat fish at least twice a week — mostly white perch (crappie) and bream, but sometimes bass. My children were raised on fish," he said.

The solution could be hard to unravel. Health officials are finding mercury in a growing number of lakes throughout the Southeast, including several others in this area, and the technology doesn't exist to get rid of it.

However, the problem at Longhorn may be correctable. Caddo resident Ruth Culver does environmental work for the Sierra Club and the Texas Center for Policy Studies. She is also active in the Uncertain Audubon Society, which received a \$50,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to oversee the cleanup at the old ammunition plant site.

"As far as the Army is concerned, we're pleased with what they have done so far. We would like to see more, but my impression is that there is some good work going on there," Culver said.

The chances are encouraging that the cleanup can be completed before any contaminants from the ammo plant reach Caddo Lake.

But the mercury remains. Out on the lake, Pete Rose hooks another keeper bass while perhaps wondering if he should put it back.



Some of the cypress trees growing on the Texas side of Caddo Lake are hundreds of years old.

## Who is in charge of Caddo Lake

Whether concerns stem from what's being put into Caddo Lake, to what's being pulled out, the question of who actually governs the 32,500-acre lake is as murky as the water in it.

A gamut of governing boards all have a measure of responsibility in protecting the lake that extends between Louisiana and Texas.

Unlike other lakes in the region, Caddo Lake does not have a lake commission. So depending on what's happening on the lake on a given day, given hour,

agencies ranging from the U.S. Coast Guard to the Environmental Protection Agency to the Caddo Parish Levee Board could have jurisdiction over a given problem. Here's a look at who to contact:

■ **WATER QUALITY:** Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission — (512) 239-1000.

■ **FISHING/SPORTS:** Texas Parks and Wildlife Department — (903) 938-1107; Louisiana Department of Wildlife and

Fisheries — 676-7504.

■ **ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES:** Environmental Protection Agency — (214) 948-4435; Texas Department of Health — (214) 767-3301; Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality — (504) 342-1234.

■ **BOATING AND SAFETY:** U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary (district office in New Orleans) — (504) 589-2972.

■ **DAMS AND LEVEES:** U.S. Army Corps of Engineers — 226-9913.