

CADDO LAKE: ENDANGERED JEWEL

Opinions differ on best ways to utilize lake

Ecotourists are flocking to local site, but some say urban problems come with them.

By REEVES FEILD
The Times

Marina owner Rod Hines knows some of his friends and neighbors would like to put a fence around Caddo Lake to keep tourists out.

But they probably would still come.

"There's no keeping it a secret. The lake has been discovered," he said. "Tourism is the economic future of Caddo."

Some call it ecotourism. For the same reason that millions of people flock to Yellowstone National Park or the Grand Canyon every year, outsiders are discovering one of this area's most unique natural resources, designated under the Ramsar Treaty as a "wetland of international importance."

Spilling out over some 32,500 acres along the Texas-Louisiana border, Caddo boasts the largest inland stand of bald cypress in the Lone Star State. It supports a tremendous variety of flora and fauna, including numbers of neotropical songbirds, and has one of the most diverse fisheries found anywhere.

Until recent years, area residents mostly had Caddo to themselves. While some enjoyed water skiing or cruising along its open channels, fishing was the big attraction. Anglers caught bass, catfish, bream and crappie out of the shadows of moss-draped cypress trees.

They motored around in flat-bottom johnboats with small outboard motors that left little evidence of their passing.

Some enthusiasts made their homes there, while others had weekend camps or lived in nearby communities such as Shreveport, Mooringsport, Vivian and Oil City on the Louisiana side of Caddo and Waskom, Marshall, Jefferson, Karnack and Uncertain on the Texas side of the lake.

Now bass anglers come from hundreds of miles around to fish for Caddo's trophy largemouths, and local residents complain about the deafening roar of airboats and those "personal watercraft" — known to most as jet skis — racing along the open bayous and disturbing the once-quiet backwaters.

Pontoon boats loaded down with tourists regularly leave out of the lakeside community of Uncertain for hourlong "swamp tours," and camera-carrying canoeists from Dallas, Houston and other urban areas venture far back into the flooded cypress to enjoy the many natural wonders of Caddo.

Dallas businesswoman Marilyn Wofford first discovered Caddo back in the late 1970s, and now spends two or three weekends a month at Uncertain. She keeps a boat there, and sleeps in her camper at Shady Glade Marina or at the nearby Whispering Pines Lodge "when I feel like cleaning up."

"It gets me totally out of the urban environment," Wofford said. "The quietness of it — it's like stepping back in time. It's an adventure going into some of those backwater areas. I enjoy fishing for bass and crappie but will often set my pole aside and pick up my binoculars. There are so many different birds that we don't have in the Dallas area."

"I think the growth of Caddo Lake has



A wading bird flies through the cypress trees that grow in Caddo Lake. The lake is home to a variety of wildlife, including some endangered species.

The Times/KIM HUGHES

just begun," said Cindy Williams, who along with her husband, Victor Williams, built and operates Whispering Pines Lodge. It is one of several bed-and-breakfasts to open in Uncertain as the demand for quality overnight accommodations has increased. Rates range from \$85 to \$95 a day.

While living in Jefferson, the couple fought against the proposed Daingerfield Reach, championed by East Texas Congressman Jim Chapman. It would have brought commercial barge traffic from the Red River up through Caddo Lake to Daingerfield, Texas.

That project has been shelved by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. With the growth of ecotourism came a number of controversies. Plans by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to improve facilities within the 7,000-plus-acre Caddo Lake State Park and Wildlife Management Area are being down-scaled after business owners in and around Uncertain complained about having to compete with the state.

"The master plan is being redone in accordance with the opinions to come out of a public hearing at Caddo several months ago," said Shreveport attorney Marshall Jones Jr., chairman of the

citizen's planning committee helping to coordinate the project.

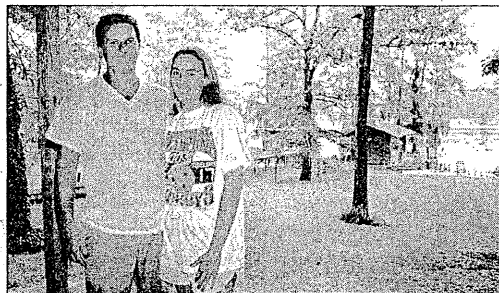
"There was concern about too much intrusion into the wildlife management area with the construction of several proposed mini-parks (in the wetland itself), and plans to build a lodge at the state park have been put on hold until we're sure that the demand and the funding are there," Jones said.

Caddo Lake residents clearly enjoy the quiet life, and there is little support for the kind of development that would threaten that — even if it's at the expense of economic growth.

"If we wanted a bunch of factories around us, we would go live in Dallas," said Betty Hines, mayor of Uncertain and owner of the Caddo Grocery.

She said the community probably has grown 25 percent since she and her late husband first opened their business six years ago.

"Tourism needs to be strictly controlled," said Karl Campbell, manager



Victor and Cindy Williams built and operate the Whispering Pines Lodge in Uncertain, Texas. Says Cindy, "I think the growth of Caddo Lake has just begun."



Betty Hines

of the old Dallas Caddo Club and a member of the Uncertain City Council.

"We don't want another national park or Branson, Mo. We don't want it trashed like other places I've seen. The people who live here can take care of the environment better than the government

can," Campbell said.

Said Rod Hines, whose family has run Shady Glade Marina for 52 years, "Environmentalism is a bad word around here. Conservation is not. People are naturally resistant to change, but people in East Texas loathe change."