

# Caddo Lake is a natural treasure

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UNCERTAIN, Texas – Caddo Lake is one of those "must-see" natural attractions, if only because there's nothing quite like it in a state that features more ecological diversity than some continents.

Straddling the Texas-Louisiana border, Caddo is cloaked in mystery as surely as its towering cypress trees are shrouded in Spanish moss. In these parts, they still argue about how Texas' only sizable natural lake was formed.

The lake's namesake Caddoan Indians believed the sprawling, shallow waterway was formed by a giant flood. Another theory is that Caddo was created by the 1811 earthquake at New Madrid, Mo., which also was credited with the creation of Reelfoot Lake in [Tennessee](#).

Most scientists today think Caddo was formed when water was backed up by a huge natural logjam on the [Red River](#), though there's still argument about the relationship between the logjam and the earthquake.

No matter how it was formed, Caddo Lake is the Texas equivalent of Georgia's forbidding Okefenokee Swamp, and it's the only large Lone Star lake that remotely resembles a primordial swamp. It's also the birthplace of offshore oil drilling rigs.

A tour around Caddo with members of [The Nature Conservancy \(TNC\)](#) is like a lesson in natural history. Lethargic water snakes and turtles bask on logs, and a barred owl, nocturnal biorhythms disturbed by the grumbling outboard, hides behind a mossy curtain. An alligator slips silently beneath the lake's tannin-stained water.

Towering groves of bald cypress include trees that were nearly 200 years old in 1811. This unusual ecosystem is home to more than 200 bird species, 47 different mammals and 90 kinds of reptiles and amphibians. It also supports one of the most diverse plant communities in Texas.

Because Caddo is so unique, it's one of only 27 American Ramsar sites designated as Wetlands of International Importance. Ramsar was a 1971 international convention in Ramsar, Iran, devised to encourage the preservation of wetlands because of concerns over vanishing water bird habitat.

Caddo is the only Ramsar site in Texas. Other American sites include the Everglades, the Okefenokee and Chesapeake Bay. Caddo was dedicated in 1993 with 8,000 acres of public land, mostly in the Caddo Wildlife Management Area. The site has been expanded to 20,000 acres.

You would think that would be enough of a buffer to ensure the safety of this national treasure, but Caddo is under siege from internal and external forces. With an average depth of less than five feet, invasive plant species like hydrilla, water hyacinth and giant salvinia threaten to take control.

Salvinia, perhaps the scariest of the invasive species because it spreads easily and grows fast, covered 4,000 to 5,000 acres of Caddo last year.

"Luckily, cold weather and high water knocked back the vegetation over the winter," said David Bezanson, TNC's North/East Texas Program Manager. "Humans could have spent \$50 million on chemical control and not accomplished what Mother Nature did over the winter."

Unfortunately, El Nino rains don't mesh often enough with freezing weather to combat invasive plants.

Bezanson said the positive effects of recent high waters are an indication of how water flows can impact wetlands. Few major American rivers remain undammed. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manages more than 600 dams.

Managed for human water supply, flood control and hydroelectric generation, the dams have the unintended consequence of disrupting the normal flow of downstream water. Unnatural water flows impact everything from wetlands to coastal estuaries.

In 2002, the Nature Conservancy and the Corps of Engineers launched the National Sustainable Rivers Project (SRP) to study river-flow requirements and adjust dam operating plans to achieve environmentally friendly flows.

That led to the Cypress Basin Flows Project initiated in 2004 by the TNC, the Corps of Engineers, Caddo Lake Institute, the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District and many other organizations.

According to TNC, the project is demonstrating that science-guided adjustments to dam operations can improve downstream health while maintaining or increasing normal services for which the dam was intended.

Work continues on this project, but there's a good chance the mysteries of Caddo Lake will endure for another 200 years.