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SECURING OUR FUTURES:

A LEGACY OF SUPPORT FOR COASTAL RESTORATION

RESTORE THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER DELTA
SEPTEMBER 2023



RESTORE
THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER DELTA

Restore the Mississippi River Delta (MRD) is a coalition of local and national environmental organizations working within Louisiana to rebuild and restore the coast. The coalition has been conducting public opinion research among Louisiana voters since 2013 and media research about coastal issues since 2016.

Media research has explored the core themes, topics, messengers and tone that have driven the conversation in both national and local media around coastal restoration and coastal land loss. The goal of this research has been to better understand patterns and changes in the conversations through the years.

Hattaway Communications worked on behalf of MRD to synthesize the findings from the many years of public opinion and media research. This report discusses findings primarily between 2017 and 2023.



Louisianians are proud of their unique cultures and communities—and they’re committed to preserving their way of life for future generations in the face of changing weather and climate conditions. From northern Louisiana to the coast, across communities and demographic divides, statewide surveys and media coverage over the past decade show widespread support for coastal restoration efforts that protect the ecosystem as well as the jobs, safety and well-being of Louisianians.

There is no single solution to Louisiana’s land loss crisis. The state has embraced a wide array of projects designed to rebuild the natural infrastructure, including sediment diversions, marsh creation through dredging and reef building through oyster shell recycling.

The critical guiding strategy behind these efforts is the Louisiana Coastal Master Plan. The plan, a national model for coastal restoration and protection, is built on the latest data and deserves credit for placing Louisiana at the forefront of climate innovation. Updated every five to six years since 2007, it creates a path for government, researchers, nongovernment organizations and other partners to collaborate and make smart investments that rebuild

the ecosystem and restore Louisianians’ sense of security in their homes.

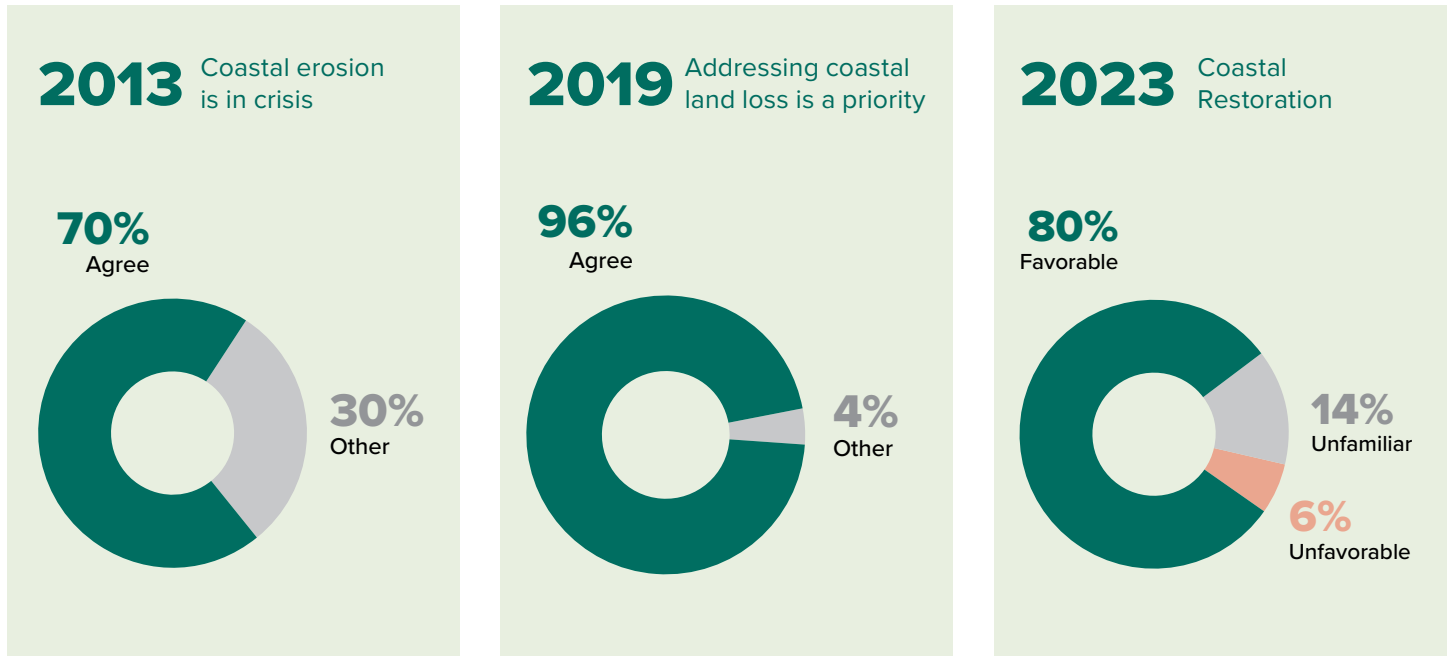
The 2023 update to the Coastal Master Plan outlines Louisiana’s plans for the future of coastal restoration and the completed projects that are making a difference. Louisianians have proved that they know what works to safeguard their cultures and communities. Uniting in support of the Coastal Master Plan is uniting in support of Louisiana’s legacy.



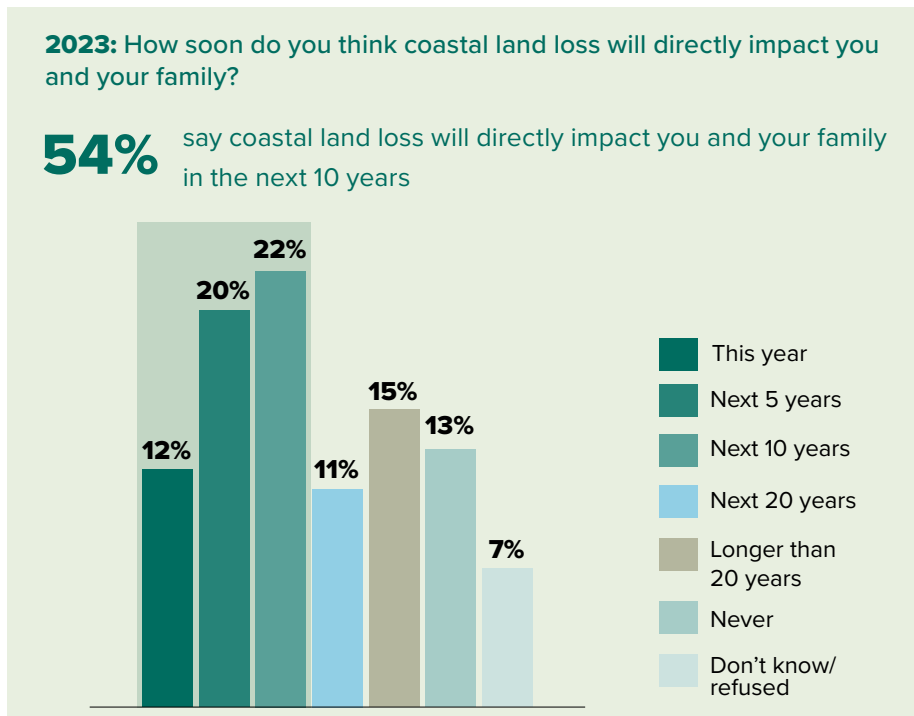
Photo credit: Samantha Carter, NWF

LOUISIANIANS SUPPORT COASTAL RESTORATION

Louisianians are widely united in support of coastal restoration—and they have been for the past decade.



Louisianians feel an immense sense of urgency around coastal restoration and land loss. They are concerned that coastal land loss will directly impact them, their families and Louisiana in the next 10 years—if they have not been impacted already. In 2023, half (54%) of registered voters statewide said they thought that coastal land loss would directly impact them and their families in the next 10 years. In 2021, 86% of coastal residents said stronger hurricanes and increased coastal flooding are already having a serious impact on Louisiana, and another 70% agreed that stronger hurricanes and increased coastal flooding are already having an impact on them and their families.



The media has reflected this sense of urgency throughout the years, and that urgency has only increased in recent coverage. In 2021–2022, urgency was a major driver of conversation due to widespread agreement that we are at a tipping point with climate change and that we need to be swift and proactive to save our coastal communities. Between September 2021 and August 2022, the idea that we need to “act now” to save the coast or to mitigate climate change appeared in 22% of all articles sampled.

The public and the media are aware of and support the idea of coastal restoration, but fewer people are familiar with the Coastal Master Plan—four in five registered voters in 2023 who were familiar with the plan were in favor of it, but a majority of the public was still unfamiliar. The lack of public awareness is reflected in the media: the Coastal Master Plan is not always explicitly connected to the popular coastal restoration projects it covers.

The Coastal Master Plan is the backbone that supports a range of policies and projects that Louisianians value, but many residents still haven't heard of it. While the projects are popular, the work can take time and care to build and produce results—which makes it less attractive to the media. The plan lays out the direction forward, and people are united in support of its projects that protect their cultures and communities.

To ensure these essential projects continue, Louisiana voters can learn more about the plan and its impacts. By talking about the plan with friends, family members and officials, voters can spread awareness and support for coastal restoration work.

WHY DO LOUISIANIANS SUPPORT COASTAL RESTORATION?

Louisianians support coastal restoration because they see it as an essential step in protecting themselves from urgent concerns about coastal land loss and climate change.

Louisianians are concerned about the future of their communities and cultures in the face of land loss and worsening extreme weather. They see building and maintaining wetlands through coastal restoration efforts as one of the best buffers to protect against the impacts of changing weather and a hostile climate.

More than three in four voters in 2019 believed that weather events, from flooding to hurricanes, were becoming more extreme (77%) and that extreme weather would have a greater impact on future generations in Louisiana (80%). Today, however, Louisianians believe there is hope: three in four (74%) registered voters in 2023 believed that sediment diversions—a core part of Louisiana's coastal restoration strategy to rebuild land—would have a positive impact on coastal Louisiana's ability to withstand hurricane storm surges and sea level rise. Nearly all (92%) of 2018 voters said they supported sediment diversions when told they would help create a wetland buffer to protect their homes from storm surges and hurricanes.

The media research demonstrated that media reported on the increasing impacts that extreme weather events and sea level rise have had on Louisiana homes and communities, as well as the ways coastal restoration helps create buffers to protect against these changes. In the last three years, themes about the importance of protecting and rebuilding coastal wetlands and coastal restoration's role in providing important buffers to protect against climate change have become more frequent. For example, the 2021 article *Near Venice, Louisiana Is Building a 7-Mile Ridge of New Land to Buffer Storm Surge*¹ described the benefits of a huge ongoing restoration project that was building seven miles of land and marsh to bolster Louisiana's natural buffers against hurricanes.

¹ H. Parker (November 3, 2021), *Near Venice, Louisiana Is Building a 7-mile Ridge of New Land to Buffer Storm Surge*. https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article_e3d572ee-3cec-11ec-bc24-7f96c493f80b.html



Local perspective

Restoring the New Orleans Landbridge will provide storm protection for the 1.5 million people that live near and surrounding Lake Pontchartrain. The Coastal Master Plan ensures needed protection and restores the coast we call home.

– LaVerne Toombs, small business owner, life long Louisiana resident

Louisianians are concerned about worsening weather events—and hopeful about restoring the coast. While polling underscores the concern, media coverage also highlights the hope of coastal restoration as a sustainable way to combat the current tipping point of climate change through these natural buffers against harsh storms and flooding.

Two-thirds of 2023 registered voters agreed that if we fail to act, climate change will have a serious impact on future generations of Louisianians (65%) and that climate change is already having a serious impact on Louisiana (69%).

Media coverage, while acknowledging that we are at the “tipping point” of climate change, has also highlighted that there is hope in the actions Louisiana is currently taking, such as coastal restoration, to mitigate its impacts. Residents, academics and local business owners agree that coastal restoration is a sustainable way to secure their culture, livelihoods and future.

Media research found that media coverage has highlighted the work of the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA), which, since its creation, has restored nearly 72 miles of barrier islands and berms. As a critical first line of defense, these restoration projects have played a crucial role in ecological preservation and provided essential storm surge protection for the residents of southern Louisiana. In 2021, the CPRA pumped

millions of cubic feet of sand onto the beach on Grand Isle, hoping to rebuild a mile of land that would protect communities from storm surges. In the article *Grand Isle Faced Hurricane Ida Head On. Here’s How the Island Is Fighting for Its Future*², CPRA executive director Bren Haase maintained the authority’s work had shielded Grand Isle from even further damage, saying “I shudder to think what the impacts might have been had that work not been done at the pass.”

There has also been coverage that highlighted that safeguarding the barrier islands has been particularly vital, as they protect over one million residents in Plaquemines, Jefferson, Orleans, St. Bernard and Terrebonne Parishes from potential storm impacts and other coastal hazards. One example of large-scale restoration completed by the CPRA, as detailed in the article *West Grand Terre Restoration Project Wraps Up*³, discussed the \$100 million West Grand Terre Beach Nourishment and Stabilization project. The project restored 251 acres of beach and dune and 147 acres of back-barrier marsh on the island.

²H. Golden (March 3, 2022), [Grand Isle Faced Hurricane Ida Head On. Here’s How the Island Is Fighting for Its Future](https://www.wdsu.com/article/grand-isle-faced-hurricane-ida-head-on-heres-how-the-island-is-fighting-for-its-future/39299002#:~:text=%22Hurricane%20Ida%20forced%20people%20to,to%20keep%20this%20place%20standing). <https://www.wdsu.com/article/grand-isle-faced-hurricane-ida-head-on-heres-how-the-island-is-fighting-for-its-future/39299002#:~:text=%22Hurricane%20Ida%20forced%20people%20to,to%20keep%20this%20place%20standing>

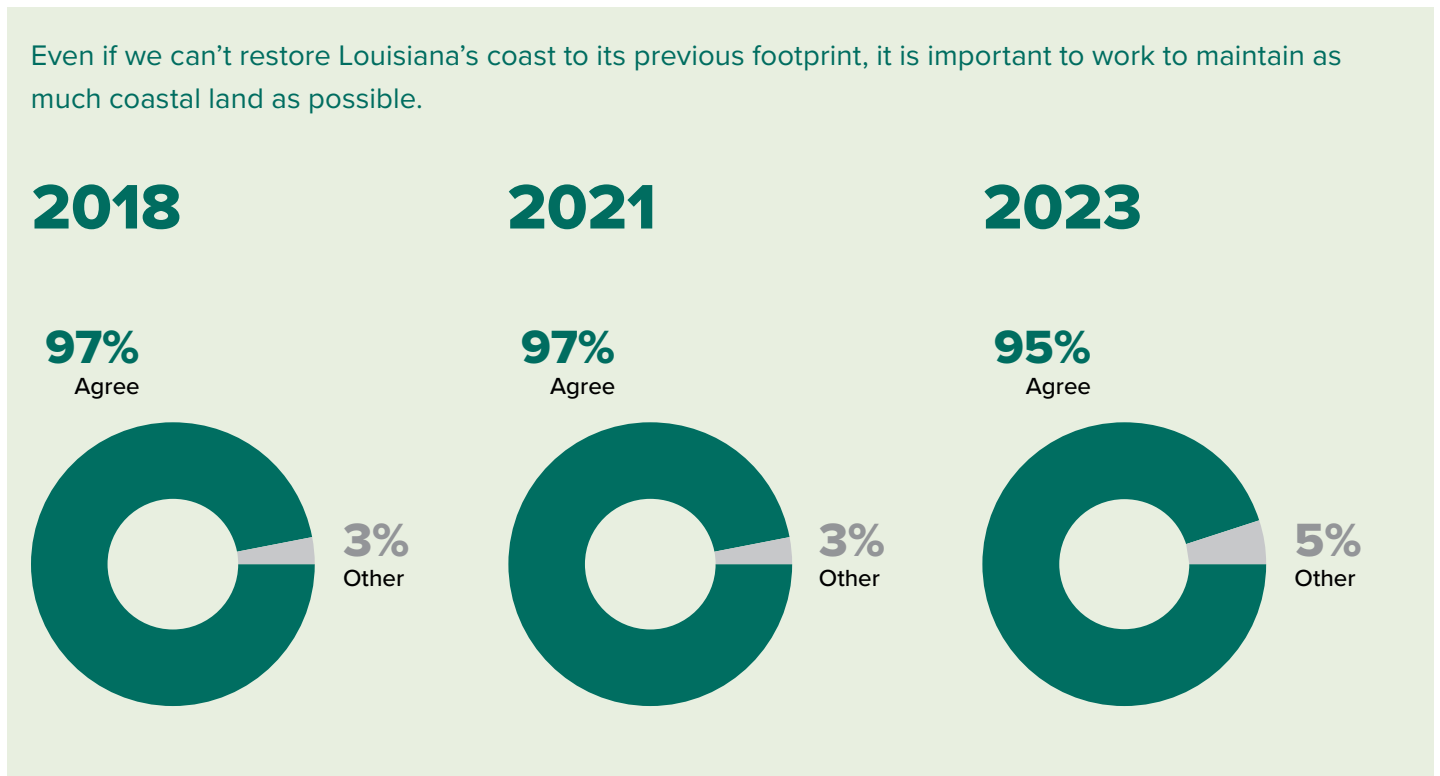
³E. Ganic (July 27, 2022), [West Grand Terre Restoration Project Wraps Up](https://www.dredgingtoday.com/2022/07/27/west-grand-terre-restoration-project-wraps-up/). <https://www.dredgingtoday.com/2022/07/27/west-grand-terre-restoration-project-wraps-up/>

WHAT COASTAL RESTORATION EFFORTS DO LOUISIANIANS SUPPORT?

Louisiana residents support a wide variety of actions to ensure large-scale restoration efforts are developed and completed.

Louisianians feel that coastal restoration action is important for maintaining as much of the coast as possible, even if it will never return to its original footprint. They understand they can't make it perfect, but they think it's important to make it better.

Nearly all 2023 registered voters agreed that it's important to maintain as much coastal land as possible, even if they can't restore Louisiana's coast to its previous footprint. This sentiment has remained strong for several years.



The media coverage has continued to be positive about rebuilding the Louisiana coast. For example, from September 2021 to August 2022, 10% of articles included themes relating to rebuilding the coast, such as “Louisiana is committed to rebuilding land.”

Media research also found that media coverage has highlighted the progress that is being made by the Coastal Master Plan. For example, the aforementioned West Grand Terre Beach Nourishment and Stabilization project involved restoring one of Louisiana's most important coastal areas. The media underscored that the completion of this project showcased Louisiana's progress in rebuilding the land and highlighted the state's commitment to providing greater protection and resilience to the coastal communities and ecosystems in the region.

The media has featured stories about how residents have come together to advocate for coastal restoration priorities. For example, in 2016, Louisiana residents passionately expressed their concerns and aspirations during [LA SAFE's](#) land loss mitigation proposal unveilings, where they supported action and progress in coastal restoration initiatives. This collective advocacy effort underscored the community's commitment to safeguarding their natural environment, livelihoods and cultural heritage. By voicing their opinions and working toward sustainable solutions, these residents exemplified the power of informed and engaged communities in shaping a resilient future.



Residents understand how important coastal restoration is to the state and are willing to support most actions that push forward coastal protection:

- **Supporting the Coastal Master Plan:** Residents were eager to learn that Louisiana had a plan, such as the Coastal Master Plan, that was backed by science. More than 9 in 10 (92%) of 2023 registered voters agreed that it's important for Louisiana to have a plan to deal with coastal land loss that keeps up with the latest science.
- **Supporting Sediment Diversions:** Louisianians were very supportive of sediment diversions. Three-fourths (73%) of 2023 registered voters said they supported sediment diversions once they learned that the diversions build and maintain coastal wetlands over time.
- **Supporting Public Officials:** Louisianians wanted their lawmakers to support coastal restoration action. More than four in five (84%) 2023 registered voters and 2021 coastal voters, respectively, said they felt favorably toward lawmakers who support strong action to protect and restore Louisiana coastal areas and wetlands. Of 2019 voters, 86% said they would be less likely to support officials who remove funds from the Coastal Trust Fund (a constitutionally protected trust fund that finances projects that restore Louisiana's coastal area). More than half (52%) of 2017 voters said they would be more likely to vote for their legislators if they supported the Coastal Master Plan.
- **Supporting Funding:** Residents wanted more funding secured for coastal restoration, and some were even willing to pay more for increased funding. Nearly all (97%) 2019 voters thought that committed funds should be protected and that more funds should be identified to address the problem. Almost two-thirds (63%) would support paying a state tax if they knew funds from that tax would go directly to funding coastal restoration and protection across Louisiana.

Coverage in 2022 featured a summer camp for Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe's children. It highlighted the critical role of youth in preserving Louisiana's unique culture amidst land loss challenges. Through this remarkable initiative, the young participants were educated about the ongoing land loss and the significance of preserving their cultural heritage. The camp, facilitated by the tribe, is actively involved in land loss initiatives that are aimed to instill a sense of responsibility and pride in the children toward their heritage and environment.

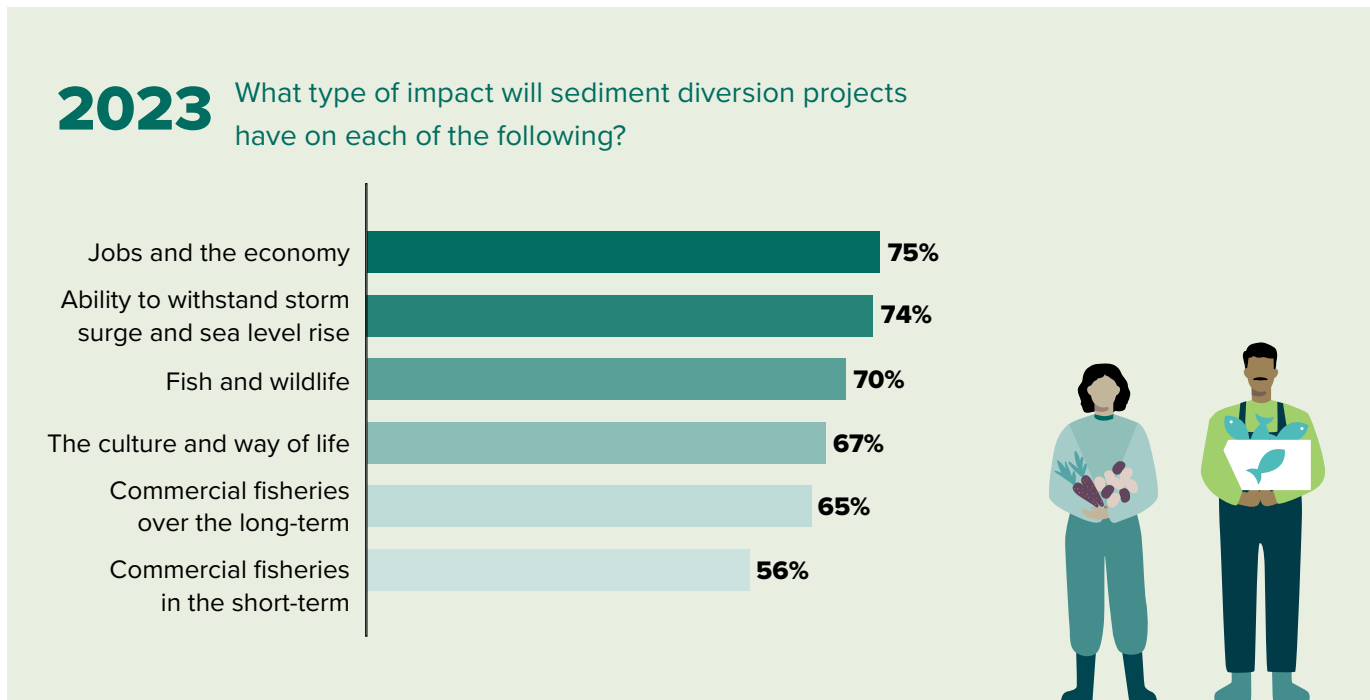
WHAT DO LOUISIANIANS SEE AS THE BENEFITS OF COASTAL RESTORATION?

Coastal restoration, supported by the Coastal Master Plan, provides Louisianians with greater security: it secures their well-being, safety, jobs and cultures as they face changing weather and climate conditions.

Louisianians know that coastal restoration safeguards their livelihoods—their homes, infrastructure and economy.

In 2017, 70% of voters were concerned that coastal land loss poses a very serious threat to jobs and the economy in coastal Louisiana.

When asked in 2023, registered voters believed that coastal restoration efforts could help alleviate their fears. A significant majority said they thought sediment diversions would have a positive impact on jobs, the economy and commercial fisheries in the short and long terms.



Although the media has not always focused on coastal issues, it has at times underscored stories of how coastal restoration keeps people safe, thereby elevating coastal restoration’s role in saving lives, defending the state against natural disasters and protecting valuable land and infrastructure from flooding. This was especially true in 2020 after Hurricane Laura, when the theme “coastal restoration keeps people safe” appeared in 14% of all articles sampled, making it one of the most common coastal restoration themes that year. The article *Hurricanes Highlight Importance of Coastal Restoration*⁴ discussed how coastal restoration, well-constructed levee systems and natural wetlands work in tandem to provide critical storm surge protection.

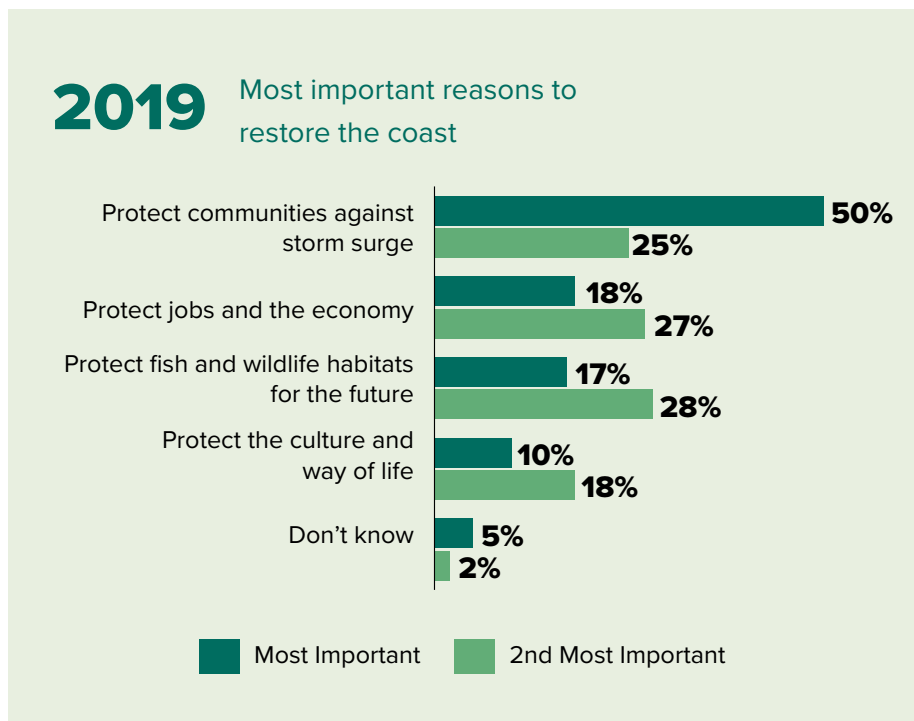
Louisianians believe that coastal restoration protects their way of life and culture.

While more than three-fourths (77%) of 2017 voters said coastal land loss poses a very serious threat to the culture and way of life in coastal communities, residents were also hopeful that coastal restoration could help. More recently, two-thirds (67%) of 2023 registered voters said they thought sediment diversions would have a positive impact on the culture and way of life in coastal Louisiana communities.

The media covered ways in which coastal restoration is beneficial for both storm protection as well as supporting local culture. Since 2020, there has been increasing coverage about how protecting the coast is vital to maintaining local culture that is at risk because parts of the coast are lost and residents are forced to leave their homes.

During 2020–2022, the theme “the coast is vital to Louisiana’s way of life or local culture” appeared in 12%–14% of articles. A recent 2022 article titled *New Coastal Studies Director at Nunez: “What Drew Me Was the Impact the Program Would Make on the Community”*⁵ addressed the positive impact the community college’s coastal restoration program could have on the community. The article elevated coastal restoration programming as an opportunity to teach and train local students to take on jobs in coastal management and wastewater, along with opportunities to help protect the way of life for the local culture.

Louisianians value that coastal restoration supported by the Coastal Master Plan keeps communities safe and intact. It especially supports vulnerable communities that are disproportionately impacted by natural disasters and land loss.



Half of 2019 voters said the most important reason to restore the coast is to protect communities against storm surges, and another quarter said it’s the second most important reason.

Although coastal restoration is not always the media’s main focus, the media has underscored how coastal restoration keeps communities safe, with coverage about how flood control projects and natural infrastructure protect people’s lives and livelihoods throughout the hurricane season.

⁴Robichaux, B (August 29, 2020), [Hurricanes Highlight Importance of Coastal Restoration](https://www.lobserveur.com/2020/08/29/hurricanes-highlight-importance-of-coastal-restoration). <https://www.lobserveur.com/2020/08/29/hurricanes-highlight-importance-of-coastal-restoration>

⁵Lemoine, B (August 5, 2022), [New Coastal Studies Director at Nunez: “What Drew Me Was the Impact the Program Would Make on the Community.”](https://www.nola.com/new-coastal-studies-director-at-nunez-what-drew-me-was-the-impact-the-program-could-on-the-community/) <https://www.nola.com/new-coastal-studies-director-at-nunez-what-drew-me-was-the-impact-the-program-could-on-the-community/> article_3b9d2ea4-1299-11ed-ae98-ef78987634a7.html



Local perspective

The Maurepas Swamp diversion is going to decrease the salinities and maybe help get the trees to grow. We don't need more open water, we need more solid marshland, and what that's going to do is sustain the land we have. It'll reduce the storm surge; it's habitat for wildlife and fish, it's habitat for everything.

– Warren Coco, small business owner, life long Louisiana resident

Since 2021, the media has also increased coverage of the need to protect coastal communities equitably. Recent hurricanes and natural disasters have illustrated the challenges faced by many Indigenous communities along the Louisiana coast, such as Grand Bayou Village and the Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe. Though these articles don't tend to frame coastal restoration as the answer, the media does raise awareness of how certain communities are disproportionately impacted by worsening weather conditions.

For example, a 2021 article, *For Louisiana's Coastal Tribes, "Being at the End of the Earth Is a Dangerous Place,"*⁶ described the devastation Native Americans living in swamps and on sinking land experienced during Hurricane Ida. They lost homes, cultural sites and important infrastructure.

Some tribes have been pushed into these dangerous areas. They then have difficulty getting help from the federal government to develop protection against storm surges and to aid in the aftermath of destructive storms. Another article titled *Who Will Protect Communities of Color from Climate Disaster?*⁷ highlighted that Black, Brown and Indigenous communities across the Gulf Coast are being disproportionately harmed by pollution and damaging storms and described the failure of governments to protect those communities from toxins and the repercussions of climate change.

Louisianians know that they are on the front lines of changing weather and climate conditions. They value coastal restoration work because it restores their sense of security and their cultural legacy.

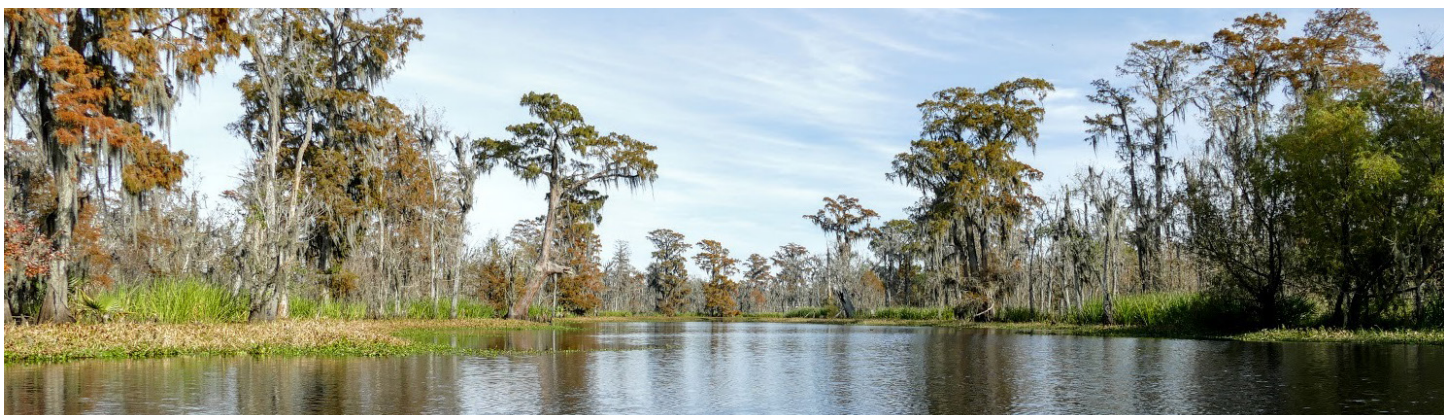


Photo credit: John Hazlett

⁶ H. Parker (September 6, 2021), *For Louisiana's Coastal Tribes, "Being at the End of the Earth Is a Dangerous Place."* https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article_8751e728-0d8a-11ec-9fa1-cb44d2a508a1.html

⁷ J. Beard, B. Frosh, R. Ozane (August 31, 2022), *Who Will Protect Communities of Color from Climate Disaster?* <https://thehill.com/opinion/energy-environment/3623081-who-will-protect-communities-of-color-from-climate-disaster/>

METHODOLOGY

This report utilizes polling data collected between 2013 and 2023, focusing primarily on 2017, when the last Coastal Master Plan was implemented, until today. The following provides methodological information for each survey cited:

- A survey of 800 registered voters in Louisiana, plus an oversample of coastal voters, for a total of 1,431; conducted March 7–14, 2023, by Global Strategy Group for MRD; the margin of error is +/- 3.5%.
- A survey of 1,058 registered voters in coastal Louisiana; conducted July 14–20, 2021, by Global Strategy Group for MRD; the margin of error is +/- 3.5%.
- A survey of 1,006 “chronic voters”; conducted July 23–29, 2019, by Rigamer + Pinsonat for MRD; the margin of error is +/- 3%.
- A survey of 809 “chronic voters”; conducted August 29–September 5, 2018, by Rigamer + Pinsonat for Restore the MRD; the margin of error is +/- 3%.
- A statewide survey of 1,050 likely Louisiana voters; conducted March 2–8, 2017, by Applied Technology Research Corporation for MRD; the margin of error is +/- 4%.
- A statewide survey of 1,215 likely Louisiana voters (statewide sample of 317 with an oversample of 898 in coastal areas); conducted October 10–23, 2013, by Southern Media & Opinion Research, Inc., for MRD.



Photo credit: Rory Doyle

This report also contains data from a series of Media Maps that Hattaway Communications conducted between 2016 and 2022. For each Media Map, the team reviewed a sample of articles with high audience reach about coastal restoration and related topics. Each article was coded to identify themes, messengers and sentiments:

- **Themes:** Repeated trends in the way messages are framed (e.g., “We must act now to reduce the effects of climate change.”)
- **Messengers:** People, organizations and institutions that have significant influence and reach (e.g., Chip Kline, former chairman, Coastal Protection and Restoration Agency)
- **Sentiments:** Tone of ideas being discussed which could be positive (supportive of coastal restoration arguments), negative (unsupportive of coastal restoration) or neutral (process-oriented or even-handed coverage)

The following provides further methodological information for each cited Media Map:

- Maps from 2016–2020: Five Media Maps were conducted from January to December of each year. Articles were drawn from local and national influencer sources. Each map included an analysis of a general sample of 100 of the most relevant articles about coastal restoration issues and an oversample of 50 articles about river diversions.
- Maps from 2021–2022: Three Media Maps were conducted between September 2021 and August 2022 to gather more frequent and up-to-date coverage. Media Maps reviewed 30 articles from national and Louisiana sources. The final two maps included an oversample of 10 articles each selected by MRD that were specific to coastal restoration work it has done.

ABOUT RESTORE THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER DELTA

Restore the Mississippi River Delta is a coalition of the Environmental Defense Fund, the National Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Federation, Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana and Pontchartrain Conservancy. Together, we are working to rebuild coastal Louisiana’s nationally significant landscape to protect people, wildlife and jobs. Our mission is to advance an equitable, safer and flourishing coast for Louisiana’s communities, ecosystems and economy. Our work is made possible through the Walton Family Foundation and other funders.

To learn more about Restore the Mississippi River Delta, visit our website at <https://mississippiriverdelta.org/>. If you would like to contact us or have questions about this report, please reach out to us at info@mississippiriverdelta.org.



Photo credit: Helen Rose Patterson, NWF