

Right In Front Of Our Noses

November 20, 2009

Ever heard the old expression, "The best place to hide something is right in front of your nose?"

I thought of that yet again Thursday when I drove out to the Centerville Unit of the Bayou Teche National Wildlife Refuge to take a photo of kids planting trees.

The LSU Coastal Roots Program partnered with the Friends of the Bayou Teche Refuge group and students at Franklin High School to grow cypress trees and plant them in an abandoned oil rig site on the refuge.

Let me tell you, that simple paragraph does not do the accomplishment justice.

The kids in Franklin High's agribiology and environmental science classes grew 900 cypress trees, with help from a Wal-Mart grant and guidance from LSU's program.

I want you to understand what growing 900 cypress trees means:

A whole heckuva lot.

So I drove out there to take a photo and do a little feature story, and it occurred to me that this needed to be a *big* story. All these kids, with shovels and two-foot high cypress trees, in a cleared lot, way back at the end of a gravel road in the refuge, pacing out spacing for the plants, as U.S. Fish and Wildlife, LSU Coastal Roots and Bayou Teche Refuge friends helped and smiled.

So what you'll have is an environmental nightmare that will be resurrected as wildlife habitat and ecological stability. And the project will continue year to year.

What you have here is something hidden right under your noses.

Almost any other area of the country, even the state, and local governments would be all over this like gravy on rice.

Do you folks realize what it means to have a National Wildlife Refuge in your back yard? Towns and communities like ours would mug little old ladies in dark alleys to get a National Wildlife Refuge in their area.

I do fully understand that the parish created the tourist bureau to manage such affairs and funds it accordingly, as well as with the parishwide hotel and motel tax. They do a great job, too. I also understand that both the parish and city make splashes here and there occasionally. The parish, for instance, helped put up the matching share on the boardwalk being built in the refuge.

But it's not enough. We need infrastructure to make this work, and then the tourism board can promote it, as they do the golf course, the festivals, the eagle exposition and everything else so superbly.

Because I guarantee you, ladies and germs, if this refuge was in Iberia Parish, or Natchitoches Parish, or just about any other parish you can think of they'd be pouring some money into developing it as a tourism based jewel.

Hats off to Wal-Mart from this writer, for helping out, too.

Oh, and school system, take a look at what an opportunity is before you. What an educational facility! An open-space classroom in environmental science, biology, ecology, biosphere systems, wildlife, botany...all sitting right at your doorsteps. What's not to love about it?

The school system could set up an environmental sciences center, with 10,000 acres of classroom!

The result? Sales taxes go up, business profits go up, and the area is all the better for it, and isn't that what government wants to do? Look at it this way, as economic development measures we provide infrastructure for industry, business and so forth. Well, when it comes to the refuge, nature has already put in 90 percent of the infrastructure on its own! All we need to do is provide suitable access to it.

It's a *National Wildlife Refuge!* One of only eight in the southeast part of the state, second only to our sole National Forest and that second only to having a National Park, which we don't.

Though I hear talk of ecotourism and how important it could be to our economy and how much of a treasure we have in this area, this is the summation of the effort I see: Establish committees, make plans, then go in search of *other* funding sources to accomplish goals.

And this is a legitimate and often used process. But while we're seeking, we're standing still. There needs to be some additional input of our own funds – in the same way we fund other economic development ventures – to build a few more trails, a few more markers, some limestone for some roads, some access areas and signs.

If the parish, city and school system each put up \$33,333 a year how much could be done to enhance, augment and make our refuge more accessible to the general public, i.e., *tourists?* Those people with money in their pockets to spend?

Make it \$50,000. Do more.

The refuge needs to be thought of and treated like any other economic development issue in western St. Mary Parish. Like I said, most of the infrastructure is already there. We need to change our mindset and find ways to fund some simple access options. It's not like you'll have to build megacomplexes with first-rate roads and services. It's a wildlife refuge, it's ecotourism, the more primitive the better. Some middle ground between those who want a trailside view of our natural heritage and those who want to rough it.

It is imperative that government realize the value of this refuge and the potential to the economy it harbors.