Chenier Plain Field Trip
Southwest Louisiana

Lafayette Geological Society Field Trip
May 28, 2009

Leaders: Dr. Tim W. Duex, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and Dr. Don Owen & Richard Ashmore, Lamar University in Beaumont

Group Photo

Summary of 2009 Chenier Plain Fieldtrip

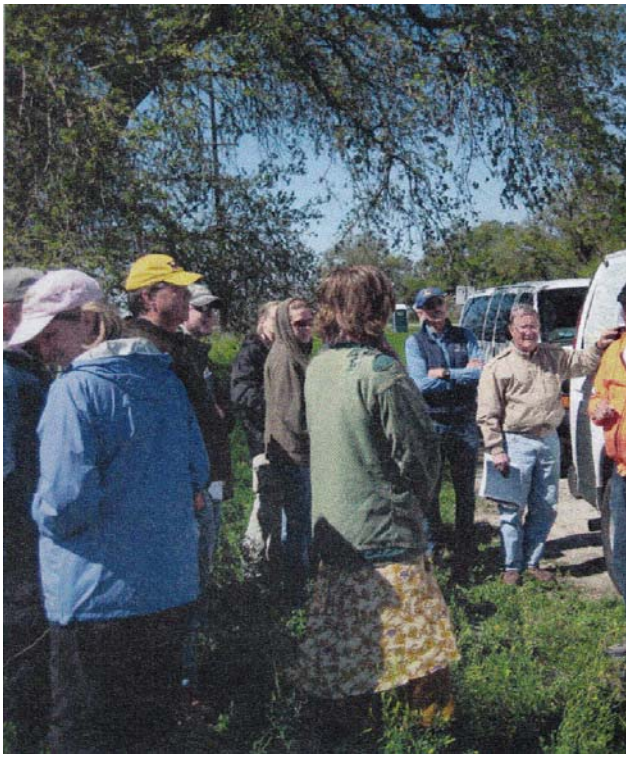
We had a good sized group attend the field trip to the Chenier Plain of southwest Louisiana last Saturday (March 28). There were about 10 of us in one van with almost that many students in another van. A cold front had moved through the area that morning and we had a strong wind blowing out of the northwest as we got started about 7 am. If you have not been down along the coast in Vermilion and Cameron parishes since Hurricanes Rita and Ike devastated the area, you need to go, because quite a bit has changed. You start noticing that things are different way before you cross the Intracoastal

Canal at Forked Island. Some houses appear to be abandoned while others have been raised and are sitting on pilings or piers or big mounds of dirt. We stopped at Pecan Island to get the low down on what a Chenier is and how it was formed and across the road was a large pond where cattle used to graze. As we made our way westward, it was quite disturbing to see the abandoned homes and camps but more so to see the number of dead oak trees that lined the road. Salt water intrusion has really taken its toll on those beautiful moss covered trees. I guess the most noticeable change was the lack of people and traffic. There is just no one living down there anymore. We passed Pecan Island High school that was abandoned after Hurricane Rita in 2005, and although some homes and camps have been renovated and raised, there were just as many or more that have not been touched since that storm flooded the area.

We met Dr. Don Owen and Richard Ashmore from Lamar University in Beaumont at the Rockefeller Refuge compound in Grand Chenier. Dr. Owen and Mr. Ashmore have done quite a bit of research on cheniers and beach ridges of southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas and the impact that the recent hurricanes have had on them. One thing of interest was that although hurricanes and other large storms may have done more to change the culture and demographics of the coast, it is the cold fronts with the strong southerly winds and high tides that precede those fronts that do more to change the physiography and geology of the coast. Hurricanes occur once every so many years while the cold fronts occur almost weekly during the fall, winter and spring.

We visited Rutherford Beach where the hurricanes have wiped out what used to be some fairly substantial sand dunes and then went on to Holly Beach (the "Cajun Riviera") where the hurricanes wiped out what used to be a fairly substantial community. The only thing left standing after Hurricane Rita was the water tower. The people down there are a hardy breed and they love this land because there was quite a bit of new construction. Someone asked "why would people live down here" and I guess a response from the locals would be "why would people live anywhere else". With all of the destruction and junk that goes with 100 mph winds and 20 feet of water; it is still beautiful country. On the way back to Lafayette, we passed a new LNG plant in Hackberry that was surrounded by old pumping oil wells. What a contrast seeing our "energy past" sitting next to our "energy future". All in all it was a great way to spend a Saturday.

Many thanks to Dr. Don Owen and Richard Ashmore from Lamar University in Beaumont for conducting the trip, to our sponsors, and to all the participants for making it a fun-filled learning experience.



Summary provided by G. King Munson