

A conversation with Mark Davis, executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana

Mark Davis is executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, a nonprofit organization that was founded in 1988 and is based in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. As its name implies, the Coalition's mission is to advocate for wise stewardship of the state's coastal waters and shoreline. The organization, a Mott grantee, also raises public awareness about the need to protect the region's coastal system and works to secure state and federal support for a comprehensive restoration plan. Davis discusses issues related to the recent Gulf Coast hurricanes in an interview with Mott Communications Officer Maggie I. Jaruzel.



Mark Davis

Mott: Contrast the Louisiana that you knew prior to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita with the one that now exists.

Mark Davis (MD): The Louisiana after these storms is largely unrecognizable compared to what we had before; we have a landscape that is dramatically reshaped and transformed. Up to this point, we were losing around 25 square miles of land each year. But just from Katrina alone, on the eastern side of the state, we lost nearly 60 square miles. We lost and reshaped barrier islands, and we have transformed areas on the western side of the state that were once fresh marshes into impounded salt and brackish ponds.

There's the physical landscape and there's also the human landscape and the cultural landscape. You not only wiped a number of communities off of the face of the map, but you also emptied the place of its population. That was an unprecedented event. It was a storm, it was a Diaspora, it was a political crisis, and it was essentially a reworking of the social and political fabric—all simultaneously—and it is still underway. The pace of change for us is uncomfortably rapid; it is almost at an incomprehensible speed now. Things are happening at a pace that we have no experience with.

Mott: For you, personally and professionally, how has life changed since Hurricane Katrina hit?

MD: Well, I am out of my home. My home is structurally intact right now but I have no utilities and no neighbors. No place to buy groceries. No place for my son to go to school. None of those things. There are buildings, but they are not communities. Over one three-week period, I had slept in more than 10 different beds. For me, personally, it has been a very much mixed bag.

There is a huge amount of frustration, anger, and sadness about this happening, about this being allowed to happen to the people and things that you care so much about. They have had their lives erased or changed. There are people—we still have board members—that we haven't heard from. We do not know anything. The one I am most concerned about is a commercial fisherman. They couldn't stay on their boats. I do not know where he is. [Note: The Coalition's missing board member finally has been located. He and his family made a harrowing escape during the storm as their home literally disappeared around them.]

An entire way of life—fishing villages, the arts, the music, the distinctiveness of the area—was all a function of the people who were here, and their relationship with the landscape around them. However chaotic and sometimes self-destructive, it is almost as if it has been put into a coma. You hope it recovers but you don't know.

On the other side of that, I just have seen an unbelievable well of compassion and generosity. I personally have had at least 10 offers from around the country to come and stay. Also, people have offered office space. We have had people coming to our website from around the country, and even overseas, with notes of encouragement and contributions. You realize that however frustrating it is to deal with policies and politics, there are enduring aspects of humanity that are almost embarrassing to be the recipient of. You say, "I don't deserve to be treated quite this nicely."

The one thing that you learn is to accept everything humbly and be far more generous with your time and your talents. You learn that you, in fact, are living on borrowed time. The one thing that has really come out of this is a sense of the preciousness of each moment and the fact that we should take nothing for granted, and make the most of each opportunity we have.

Mott: What about your organization's office—is that still intact?

MD: Yes. The office is in Baton Rouge and we actually never closed. In fact, it was one of the few places that generally had power. The office itself is functioning and in many ways busier than ever. Most of our office staff lives in the Baton Rouge area, but I live in New Orleans and we have a small office in New Orleans, which we have lost—at least for the time being.

Mott: Was there anything positive for your organization that you would say resulted from the storm?

MD: Some truly odd things. I was driving to St. Louis [Missouri] in the process of evacuating. I had a hotel room there because I had been invited to a White House conference on cooperative conservation. Instead of just me going, it was my wife, my son, my cat, my mother-in-law, and a lot more luggage than I ever imagined taking.

I was at the conference when the news came that the levees had broken and the flood walls had been breached. You realized, particularly at that moment, that there were several hundreds of thousands of people who were now without homes, without jobs, without even the sense of a future, which became clear when you saw pictures of people who not only didn't evacuate but the ones who couldn't. There I was—I at least had something to do. I had a job. In many ways, in a perverse way, my job would be higher profile. We had always been working to avoid this, so we don't really know what version of the future we are now working toward. But, for me, work was therapy as well as an opportunity to help make people understand that whatever lessons were taught by this could be applied far more broadly than Louisiana. Professionally, it was a peculiar time but one that I was extremely thankful for; thankful that I had something to do. I think it would have been incredibly difficult had I not had my work.

Mott: So your organization is moving ahead with an even stronger sense of mission and purpose?

MD: Yes. We were incredibly thankful for the people who made that possible. I know a lot of organizations that do environmental work or who do civic work down here, and their funding base is exclusively in the state of Louisiana. They got wiped out and are struggling to get by. I knew, in part because we did have the support of people like Mott, that we would endure. I hoped we would be able to rise to the challenge, but I knew we were not going to go into a crisis mode organizationally. It has been rather difficult to see your civic institutions and your governmental institutions, the ones that you normally turn to in times of crisis, to see that they are in crisis themselves. They essentially cease to exist, either because their sources of funds are gone, or their personnel lose their homes, or the banks they do business with are closed and will move away. It becomes a world without touchstones. We were lucky to have a few.

Mott: Is there any advice you would give to other environmental NGOs that are working in the region about ways to leverage this national focus for current and future gains?

MD: There is very little satisfaction in being able to say, "I told you so." But I would be almost clinically depressed if I didn't believe we had actually tried. One of the things that was incredibly gratifying was what we saw in the national media. We could actually see the response when the President and others said, "No one could foresee this." Suddenly you hear, "Well, didn't this group say that you could foresee this? Didn't this report say that we could foresee this?" Then you realize that the work had been done—the work that we had either done ourselves or collaborated on had made a difference. If nothing else, that transformed what otherwise would have been a storm story into a policy and governance story. A story that shifted the onus from "What can we do because we are charitable as a nation?" to "What must we do because we are responsible as a nation?"

Mott: It sounds like you have taken time to reflect.

MD: When you spend as much time on the road as I have—in airplanes and in cars—and a lot of people ask you about what happened, heaven knows that you think about it. I am going to digress for a moment. I was talking to a friend of mine—a guy I know at *The Times-Picayune*—one of the guys who wrote all those stories that were being quoted. Apparently, there was a time among the Pulitzer committee when they didn't give the writers a Pulitzer for what ran back then but they are thinking that it deserves a Pulitzer now.

How do you deal with the Cassandra Syndrome [a term applied to predictions of doom about the future that are not believed, but upon later reflection turn out to be correct]? That is really what has been killing me more than anything. Now, even when you start to see the response—the people who are framing the response, the people who are at the table and are writing the recovery plans and reviewing the policies—for the most part, they look a whole lot like the people who were there before. I don't really see the planners, the scientists, the advocates—the ones who said, "This is what you should be planning to avoid and this is what you should be planning for."

Whether you are working here or whether you are working on low-income housing in Albuquerque, there is a human tendency to try to put the problems at arms length and hope that they will go away or at least not become a crisis on our watch.

What we saw here [at the Coalition] was the value of having a vision, being on message, and being relentlessly so for years. That really mattered. The challenge right now is to make sure that it is clear that these things didn't have to happen the way they happened and that we have choices. We really are smart enough, wise enough and brave enough to do something about it. But are we going to be fated to not believe because Cassandra is in our face? With our understanding of the myth of Cassandra, there is a tendency to think of her as a whiner instead of someone who was given the gift of prophecy but also the curse that her prophecy would not be believed.

Mott: The Coalition's Web site suggests different things people can do, such as contact elected officials, donate money to the relief efforts, or to your organization. What have been the responses and results?

MD: We have had people visit the Web site from literally around the country and around the world—Ireland, Scandinavia, California and Vermont. The nice thing is that they often leave encouraging messages. We have had people outside the state—authors and those doing radio programs—directing people to our site, partly because they trust it. That is one of the other things I think we have come to realize. If there are lessons here in times of crisis, we've learned that people want to know who they should trust. If there was one thing that we hoped would be the case, and at the moment there is gratifying evidence, it is that we are trusted. We always wanted to be trusted. We might make mistakes. We might not always be right, but we always try to be. To that end, when people seek you out because they think your site is a place they can get information that is reliable, that is gratifying.

One of the other things we have learned and that others might take from this experience is that there will come a time when investing in your own credibility will pay. There have been times when we easily could have gone for a big press moment. We could have grabbed a headline but because we weren't sure about an issue or a fact, we didn't. At the end of the day, you have to be true to your cause and true to yourself.

I think Plato once said, "How different is the nature of the necessary from the nature of the good?" In moments like this, you realize that what looked necessary yesterday may look pretty puny in light of the world we now live in. Integrity *does* matter. Those groups out there that are expecting to do good should be encouraged to do more.

Mott: Are people responding to your suggestions to contact legislators either at the state or national level?

MD: Yes. In part, because of connections that have been made for us, we have met with representatives or their staffs from Iowa and Illinois. One of our board members, who is in Iowa, got a call from Senator Kerry, who wanted to know if we could go see him. We have had groups—other nonprofit groups who do environmental, public service work across the country—offer to help.

They've not only offered to push our message, but they've even offered to share the proceeds of their fundraising drives. We have had two of those. To be quite honest, we have had companies agree to pick up some of our travel costs, and cultural institutions have offered us office space and borrowed staff if we need it.

Mott: So it's been tangible offers of help?

MD: Yes. Very tangible. More than that, it's been very valuable. Every time you don't have to hire someone, every time you don't have to spend a dollar, every time you don't have to knock on a door yourself, then it is an opportunity to really leverage everyone's efforts and talents. We never really styled ourselves as purely an environmental group. Obviously, we work on an issue that has a huge environmental component but we always have viewed ourselves as a civic group—a group that was really focused on some things that someone needed to take responsibility for. The encouraging thing is when you start to realize how many people are really willing to not only acknowledge a problem, but take some responsibility for dealing with it.

Mott: Are there any short-term goals as a result of Hurricane Katrina that you are now working toward that would not have been on your plate a few months ago?

MD: I would like to get back in my house, which is an extremely short-term goal. But that probably won't happen until about Thanksgiving. [At the Coalition], we have come to realize the importance of working on the sustainable culture piece. We have always stood for a sustainable environment, a sustainable culture, and a sustainable economy; always thinking that those things have to fit together in a place like this.

But an environment without a constituency, at least in human experience, tends to be ignored or abused because we don't have a way of describing value. That is not to say that value is not there, but we don't tend to treat things very well if we don't have someone who can tell us that it matters to them. When we look at what's happened in Louisiana, which is a landscape that has supported family fishers, a landscape that has supported the storytelling culture. Without it, you wouldn't have Zydeco, you wouldn't have Cajun music, you wouldn't have Rhythm & Blues, you wouldn't have Jazz, you wouldn't have James Lee Burke, you wouldn't have Anne Rice, and you wouldn't have Tennessee Williams. You start to realize that a lot of things here have been exported. We always have been a harvest culture—a focus on a harvest of natural resources. But I think the harvest endures. The harvest that has come from the people who are shaped by that environment, which is actually a sustainable resource.

Right now, those people are in Diaspora. Our musicians are gone. Our writers are gone. So we are working right now to create a version of the WPA Writer's Project. A good example is nature photographer C.C. Lockwood, who had just finished a book with a painter named Maria Garry. He spent a year chronicling the seasons of our coast and he just published it.

Mott: Now will the coastline that he photographed look dramatically different?

MD: Well, the storm hit and then someone stole his boat. We realized that in order to really make a commitment to this place's recovery—again, you have to have a reason and a way for people to care. For example, Yosemite would not be a part of America's collective inheritance if it had not been for the work of Ansel Adams. I have never been to Yosemite, but I have seen thousands of Ansel Adams photographs over my life. Accordingly, I understand that Yosemite is important to me. Anything that could look that good in pictures, I want to be able to see personally. When someone says, "Should we invest in our national

parks," all they have to do is show me an Ansel Adams photograph and I get it. I mean they are not showing me a chart or a graph. They aren't showing me a loss/benefit figure. They are showing me El Capitan and I say, "OK, I am with you."

The same way if you show me the Statue of Liberty, the Liberty Bell, or Mount Vernon, I just get it. We need people out there documenting what has changed in Louisiana and tracking what is happening, which is really like an incredible dust bowl on steroids. Back then, you moved a lot of poor farmers. But this time you moved everybody. So what do they learn? What do they come back with? We got him [C.C. Lockwood] a boat. It was donated to us and he just picked it up. We are trying to find him a little bit of money because we want these people to make a living while they do this.

Mott: So will he now shoot the "after" photographs?

MD: He is basically going to just go out and shoot. Essentially, we are not telling him what he should photograph. We are saying, "The landscape and the people are your muse. Just go do what you need to do." Also, we have a volunteer coordinator coming in who knows the creative arts community. There are ideas to go out and try to raise about \$150,000 apart from everything else we have been doing. We are looking to find people with talent and energy and we will say, "Go do what you have to do and come back with a project. You can commercialize it, but there is an archiving and educational right that goes with it."

We have been doing this at the same time we have been in collaborative conversations with the National Mississippi River Museum in Dubuque, Iowa, and even the Smithsonian to see if we can start to figure out all of this into programs, education and traveling exhibits. We are not waiting 30 years to see something. There is a way of sharing this that is not what comes out of Congressional hearings. It is not like, "Who did something wrong?" It is not like, "How many dollars? How many people with MREs [Meals Ready-to-Eat]?" Those are important facts, but they are not the story.

We realize right now that there is so much that has changed out there and it is impossible for us or academics to capture it all. Keep in mind that half of our academic institutions are gone. We would normally go to the sociologists at the University of New Orleans or Tulane or folklorists here or there and ask them to work on a project. We can't do that right now because they are gone.

Mott: So you are talking about a very broad scope of devastation and loss?

MD: Yes. That was one of those things that we didn't know. We didn't know this was our job until a few weeks ago. But in our view, it is absolutely essential. If you are not naming these as values, how can I go tell a congressman why he should spend \$10 billion instead of \$2 billion? What are you buying? It is not acres, it is not cubic feet per second, it is an intangible sense of history, ownership and possibility.

Mott: Down the road, will there be the possibility to testify before legislative hearings?

MD: We are already doing that. I have been spending half of my time in Washington. The Governor is calling a special session here in a couple of weeks

and I have met with appropriators, authorizers. I was at the special stakeholder roundtable, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. I also was at the White House Council of Environmental Quality meeting. These are at their invitations, but we are seeking and sitting down with not just those on state environmental issues. We are sitting down with representatives of navigation, insurance, flood control.

We have already seen what happens when the collective lobbying muscle comes together and produces giant pork bills. Unfortunately, the state of Louisiana senators offered a bill that looked—I'm sure they understood what they are trying to do—but they didn't understand how it would be perceived and it was roundly rejected. They were called looters by the *Washington Post*. At the end of the day, it is not their job to carry this ball. It is their job to do their piece, but it really is the responsibility of citizen groups to help shape an agenda and form a constituency. It should not just be every hired gun coming in and telling them why this crisis is vital to the baked bean industry because they are paid to do that. It's their job and they will do it well. What will we do?

You then find out that if you don't have a vision of where you are going, you never actually get there. That is why we now are working on how to create not only a vision of what a restored coast might be, but what a restored Louisiana might be—one that is culturally, ecologically, and economically sustainable. It is as close to a clean slate as we have ever had and we are not going to do it alone by any means. Even with this culture piece, we would be more than happy to work with some of the more regular organizations—the humanities endowment and the universities when they get on their feet. We are not trying to replace that. We are really just trying to do what must be done right now.