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A Budding Future

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In August 2005, prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans City Park's Couturie Forest was a healthy area home to a variety of trees, including mature live oaks, bald cypresses, sweetgums, magnolias, pecans, and palmettos. Birds traveling to and from Central and South America stopped to avail themselves of abundant food provided by hackberry, elderberry, and numerous other trees and shrubs.

The forest also is the highest point in all of New Orleans. Laborde Mountain is a whopping 43 feet above sea level. For those not accustomed to such high altitudes, oxygen tanks or a Sherpa are recommended.



Wheelbarrow by wheelbarrow, volunteers planted trees, killed invasives, and laid down mulch trails throughout the forest.
Photos Courtesy Of City Park Archives

Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters covered the entire forest—save for the mountain—in up to 6 feet of water. What the brackish seawater didn't kill, strong winds and an overzealous federally funded cleanup crew did. Seventy-five percent of the trees in the forest were severely damaged, and approximately 50 percent of them were killed. The forest's former thick overstory virtually disappeared. With the sun shining, the overstory destroyed, and the soil disturbed, invasive species flourished. Chinese tallow, *Cayratia japonica* (aka bushkiller), and giant ragweed seeds thrived in this new environment.

Enlisting Help

Realizing that eradicating invasives in a 33-acre forest was not the same as ridding a front yard of dandelions, the park staff enlisted 20 park stakeholders along with the landscape-architect firm of Spackman, Mossop + Michaels. The firm designed an award-winning plan (2009 American Society of Landscape Architects Analysis and Planning Award of Excellence) for the redevelopment of the forest. The plan features seven ecosystem types:

- Oak Grove

- BottomlandHardwoodForest
- Riparian Forest
- UplandHardwoodForest
- PineForest
- Coastal Prairie
- Swamp.

With the aid of generous corporate sponsors, the park was able to hire a firm to remove 80 to 90 percent of the Chinese tallow. That was followed with the planting of more than 2,000 trees. The heavy lifting in the forest has been accomplished on the backs of thousands of volunteers who have invested their sweat equity over the past 7 years. Wheelbarrow by wheelbarrow, they planted trees, killed invasives, and laid down mulch trails throughout the forest. They also have been vigilant in removing Chinese tallow saplings when they appear.

In 2009, the park board voted to expand CouturieForest's footprint by an additional 30 acres. A 5-acre coastal prairie has also been included. This is significant, as more than 9-million acres of coastal prairie once existed along the GulfCoast, stretching across Louisiana and Texas. Less than 1 percent remains today, with few contiguous stands present in Louisiana.

Eight years after Hurricane Katrina, the forest is still a work in progress. While invasives continue to pose a threat, many of the 2,000-plus trees planted have reached heights as high as 30 feet.



An aerial view of New Orleans City Park's Couturie Forest in 2009, the same year the park board voted to expand the park by an additional 30 acres. A 5-acre coastal prairie was included in the expansion.

Most importantly, visitation to the forest continues to increase. Bird watchers spot rare painted-buntings or a soaring eagle, fathers watch their children reel in bass, joggers with bad knees appreciate the soft mulch running surface, and scores of locals enjoy escaping to a forest within the confines of a major urban city.

Lessons Learned

The revitalization of a forest does not happen in a year or two. It will likely take another 10 years before the trees planted since Hurricane Katrina are providing enough shade to inhibit the growth of invasives. In the meantime, volunteers will continue to give Mother Nature a helping hand by clearing a 3-foot perimeter around newly planted

trees.

Tackling 33 acres of ravaged forest armed largely with volunteers is rather daunting and frightening. With a plan in place, however, the area has experienced significant incremental progress over the last 8 years.

But a good plan doesn't mean there haven't been problems and setbacks. In 2012, Hurricane Isaac buffeted New Orleans with tropical-storm winds continuously for 36 hours. Torrential rain and pounding wind punished scores of recently planted trees in the forest to the point they were listing to a degree that makes the Leaning Tower of Pisa look straight.

But with a little patience and many volunteers, the emerald-green hues that once blanketed the forest are thriving again.