

Hurricane on the Bayou

The Louisiana bayou and its conservation is the theme of a new 45-minute film at the Johnson IMAX Theater at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History. The film, created by Greg MacGillivray and narrated by Meryl Streep, is a message picture, arguing—gently but insistently—that the environment of that Southern coast can be bettered and its future hurricanes mitigated by a resuscitation of protective wetlands in the bayou, serving as “natural speed bumps” to counter future big winds.

The message is delivered with some local color through the presence and words of, among others, Amanda Shaw, a 14-year-old fiddling phenomenon, her musical buddy, bluesman Tab Benoit, and jazz pianist Alan Toussaint, along with a batch of local blues, zydeco, and Cajun musicians.

The urgency of the need for wetlands preservation is heightened by footage—shot after the original idea for the film was conceived--of how both Shaw's and Benoit's homes were wracked by Hurricane Katrina. The middle of the film, showing Katrina's assault and aftermath, is a mélange of TV clips, storm models, and aerial shots giving a moving, yet somewhat distant, version of the disaster (all political commentary on the aftereffects are absent). The most affecting is real footage of the film's principals coming back to their destroyed homes in the hurricane zone.

The film, not formally rated but effectively a “G,” is most family-friendly: Tab and Amanda are winning personalities with sweet accents, and they play with real vigor (though we see them performing only in quick snatches), but “Hurricane” is also fairly anodyne and could have used more punch to make its conservation case. It doesn't take distinctive advantage of the massive IMAX format either, though smooth tracking shots of boats sliding through bayou swamp water are striking. Wise Guy Note: One could argue that even those appealing boat shots are undercut somewhat because they typically show noisy, gas-powered vessels whirling through placid river streams—not the most eco-friendly means of locomotion in this land of dark waters and sliding alligators.

(April 2007)