

Eagles' Don Henley Works to Preserve East Texas' Caddo Lake

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Longtime fishing guide Henry Lewis (left) chats with musician Don Henley outside a bait and tackle shop in Uncertain, Texas. Henley, a Gilmer native, created the Caddo Lake Institute to safeguard the lake's ecology and cultural identity. G.J. McCarthy/Staff Photographer

UNCERTAIN, Texas — Perched on a grimy bait-stand bench, beneath a sign that reads “fishing guides available,” a bearded man in an untucked denim shirt watches kids tumble off a dock into coffee-brown murk and boats cruise beneath the curtain of cypress.

At first glance, the sunburned man looks like any other Caddo Lake local.

It's his baseball cap that hints Don Henley isn't a typical lake rat. Instead of faded camouflage, the hat is navy blue, its “LIFEGUARD” logo and Red-Cross emblem framed with: “Off Duty: Save Yourself.”

The East Texas native has spent nearly 20 years and millions of dollars helping Caddo Lake residents learn to do just that — to band together, arm themselves with scientific data and go to court and Congress to protect the place that the famed rock musician calls his church.

They've succeeded so far. The lake where Henley caught his first fish as a young boy from neighboring Linden is a world-renowned wetland laboratory, thanks to Henley's Caddo Lake Institute.

"It's a success story in that we're still here," Henley says. "And we're making progress, albeit slowly."

Despite a century of exploitation of the lake, black bears and bobcats still haunt its remote corners. Alligators and otters and mink glide through its labyrinth of sloughs. Bald eagles and blue herons, egrets and ibis soar overhead.

Biologists hail Caddo as Texas' most diverse freshwater ecosystem and one of North America's finest bald cypress swamps. The lake, 165 miles east of Dallas, is a place that locals believe has a near-mystical power to help people find or lose themselves.

"You can more or less leave your troubles on the land and escape back into the cypress swamp," says resident Robert Speight. "You get back far enough and time stands still."

Scientists from around the country visit regularly for meetings sponsored by Henley's institute. One recent Thursday, several dozen gathered in a community center near the lake to share Speight's home-cooked barbecue and discuss research with him and the other locals whom Henley dubs "indigenous scholars." As always, the visitors marveled at the locals' engagement. The locals credit Henley's institute for distilling their fierce contrarianism and love for Caddo Lake into a force.

"They've given us the tools," Speight says of the institute, "to handle things ourselves."

Decades of debate over whether Caddo's water and surrounding lands should be tapped for industrial or economic development have subsided. Former combatants have joined forces with the nonprofit institute to ensure the lake's future. The region celebrated when the institute won a 14-year campaign to turn a lakeside Army ammo factory into the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

No relaxing

Yet the 63-year-old singer isn't standing down. Though just back from an Eagles concert tour in Asia and commuting from his Dallas home to Nashville, Tenn., to finish a solo album, Henley is beginning a fundraising campaign for his institute. He also headed recently to Washington, D.C., to lobby for the lake and the music industry.

In between, Henley brought two of his three children to Caddo Lake to fish beneath ancient moss-draped cypress trees. Henley says he's passing on what he learned from his late father — that it's essential to slow down and spend time in such wild places. He wants his kids to understand that preserving such natural wonders are do-it-yourself operations.

Watching his 11-year-old daughter haul in bream with a cane pole, Henley says he believes that she and her siblings understand. “I want them to be stewards of this lake after I’m gone.”

Henley’s activism began when he heard about a proposal to put a barge canal through the lake and its main tributary, Big Cypress Bayou. Then living in California, Henley had just immersed himself in a campaign to stop development at Walden Woods near Concord, Mass., the refuge of the 19th-century writer Henry David Thoreau.

Even after Henley became a celebrated member of the Eagles, the Caddo Lake area remained his home ground.

His parents met in a riverfront honky-tonk just upstream in Jefferson. Caddo Lake was a spiritual refuge for Henley’s dad, a Depression-era child of East Texas dirt farmers and owner of an auto parts store.

Throughout Henley’s boyhood, his father often woke him before dawn to fish the lake. There, Henley recalls, he got earliest glimpses of artistry, courtesy of the foul-mouthed steelworker who was his father’s fishing buddy. Henley’s awe is palpable as he describes that rough man’s gift with a fly rod.

When Henley heard that Caddo Lake was under threat, he recruited a Colorado lawyer friend, Dwight K. Shellman, to visit Texas in December 1992. The two men then created Caddo Lake Institute.

In late 1993, thanks to the institute’s work, Caddo Lake became the 13th U.S. site designated a “wetland of international importance” — joining the Everglades and Chesapeake Bay — under the Ramsar Treaty. The 1971 treaty, with 160 participating countries, is aimed at protecting wetlands and ensuring their wise use.

Shellman moved part time to Caddo Lake and forged bonds with residents. The lawyer also coordinated Caddo Lake’s first substantive scientific research.

“Before that, nobody was studying the lake,” said Roy Darville, the institute’s biologist and a professor at East Texas Baptist University.

Shellman convinced Henley of the need to make Caddo Lake a living laboratory and recruit government and academic researchers. Even so, Henley recalls thinking Shellman was crazy when he proposed asking the Army to transfer its mothballed ammunition plant on the lake’s south shore to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for a wildlife refuge.

Shellman had a wily ability to find openings and allies. Henley had star power. They made repeated pilgrimages to Washington.

“Once he’d established what the target was or who the target was, then he would bring me in,” Henley recalls. “We used everything at our disposal — every concert, any chance.”

Blood, sweat and tears

Getting the refuge took years of prodding and a showdown with businessmen who wanted to turn the Army plant into an industrial park. There was also a legal battle to stop the city of Marshall from selling lake water to a power plant. That ended with an institute victory after both sides spent a total of more than \$1 million on legal fees.

Some in Marshall tried to paint Henley as an outsider enjoying a rock star's hobby. That bemuses Henley.

"I've put in too much blood, sweat and tears for this to be a hobby. A hobby is supposed to be fun," he says. "It's rarely fun because there's always something to worry about; there's always somebody trying to mess with the lake."

When the federal wildlife refuge finally opened in September 2009, Shellman was retired and too debilitated from Lou Gehrig's disease to attend the dedication.

His photograph is displayed prominently at the refuge's Ramsar education center in a restored guard-house. Beneath Shellman's photo is the only mention of Henley around the lake. His name is in tiny type in a list of supporters of the guard house restoration.

Though he owns lakefront property and visits regularly, Henley cherishes his low profile.

"It's not about me," he says. "It's about the work, and it's about the place, and it's about the people who live here and recreate here."

The institute's director, Austin environmental lawyer Rick Lowerre, is leading a regional water planning process aimed at ensuring adequate environmental flows for Caddo Lake. That effort is considered a statewide model for water planning.

One of the institute's targets is the giant salvinia, an invasive Brazilian water weed that first appeared at Caddo Lake in 2006. A Texas A&M study there involves breeding a species of weevils that gobble the plant.

Alarming levels of mercury have been documented in lake's food chain, including the highest level recorded in any snake on the planet. Much of the mercury has been traced to exhaust from nearby coal-burning power plants.

When the Eagles' Asian tour stopped in Beijing, Henley met with researchers developing cleaner-burning coal plant technologies. Later this year, he plans to meet with the head of the large U.S. power company that is partnering with the Chinese.

"Sound science may be our saving grace," he says. "But oftentimes in Washington — and certainly in Texas — politics trumps science."

He is cautiously optimistic, but the challenge is a big one: finding a balance between human demands and environmental realities.

“What Will Rogers said about land back in 1930 can be applied to water,” Henley says. “They ain’t making any more of it.”