

Symposium to highlight area bays, bayous

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The coastal waters between Florida and Louisiana, home to some of the Gulf Coast's best preserved and least known marshes and swamps, will be the focus of the Alabama-Mississippi Bays and Bayous Symposium to be held Tuesday and Wednesday.

The Bays and Bayous Symposium, at the Arthur R. Outlaw Mobile Convention Center, will bring together a handful of the world's best-known marine scientists with expertise in issues facing the northern Gulf of Mexico.

Those issues include the so-called dead zone, as well as overfishing, mercury pollution and the ecological impacts of a growing coastal population.

The keynote address by Sylvia Earle, famed undersea explorer and scientist, is titled "Sea Change" and will focus on man's impact on the oceans and on the population's ignorance about those impacts. Earle is an Explorer in Residence with the National Geographic Society and was named Time magazine's first Hero for the Planet. While there is a fee to attend the full two-day event, Earle's lecture Tuesday morning is open to the public.

David Yeager, with Mobile Bay's National Estuary Program, said the several hundred people already registered for the conference are "really an indication of the level of interest in coastal Alabama and Mississippi, interest that wasn't there a few years ago."

Florida and Louisiana, he said, have long shared the spotlight when it comes to scientific interest in the Gulf of Mexico. It's only in the last few years that the scientific world has come to appreciate the aquatic systems along the Alabama and Mississippi shoreline. For instance, Alabama has more species of crawfish - 84 - than any other state.

Yeager said that between 1985 and 1995, there were 1,800 scientific papers published about the Chesapeake Bay, compared with just 40 papers devoted to Alabama waters.

"Now, for this symposium, we have 80 papers about our area being presented; all were published in just the last year," Yeager said. "We think Sylvia Earle's message about our impacts to our coastal areas is profound. Her conclusion that out of all the threats to the oceans, including overfishing, pollution, radioactive wastes being dumped, her biggest threat to the oceans is ignorance ... ignorance to the idea that it is all one ocean and all one planet. I think symposiums like this help dispel some of that ignorance she was talking about."

The symposium consists of four main lectures. Orrin Pilkey, an outspoken Duke University professor and specialist in coastal erosion, will speak Tuesday evening. Pilkey

has studied Alabama's shoreline for decades and written a number of acclaimed books, including "The Corps and the Shore" and "Living with the Alabama-Mississippi Shore."

Nancy Rabalais, one of the first scientists to identify and write about the "dead zone" off Louisiana, will speak Tuesday afternoon. Rabalais' specialty is the study of hypoxia or oxygen-depleted water. Hypoxic conditions in Mobile Bay are the major factor in the Eastern Shore's famed summertime jubilee events. Scientists have known for years that Mobile Bay plays host to its own small "dead zone" each summer, in an offshore area near the middle of the bay.

There are also dozens of scientists presenting their research during morning and afternoon sessions in smaller lecture rooms. Each presentation will be devoted to a specific topic, such as water quality or coastal hazards.

Yeager said the individual research papers focus on topics including water quality, sea creatures (both native and invasive), habitat management, natural hazards and the growing footprint of coastal development.

The opening lecture is free, and seats are available. Yeager said the public can still register for the rest of the two-day event - which includes several meals - for \$150 per person or \$37.50 for students. To register for the symposium or obtain a schedule, call 431-6409 or visit <http://ambbs.mobilebaynep.com>.