

Oil Companies Have Plundered Louisiana's Coast. They Owe Us Reparations.

Native and Black communities suffering the most from coastal damage need reparations for past abuse while we fight for systemic change.

By [Courtney Naquin](#)

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In a rare victory, Louisiana recently reached a [\\$100 million settlement](#) with the mining giant Freeport-McMoRan Inc., for contributing to the erosion rapidly devouring the state's coast.

And this is just the beginning. Recently, a federal court ordered a [nine-year-old lawsuit](#) to return to state court. The suit was filed against Chevron USA, Exxon Mobil Corp., ConocoPhillips Co. and BP America. Over 40 similar legal challenges may follow against the oil and gas companies that have caused, and are causing, Louisiana's wetlands to disappear at an alarming rate. These lawsuits could win billions of dollars in damages.

The call for accountability against oil and gas companies is critical, but the dominant narrative misses an essential component: There's no mention of financial reparations for Indigenous and historically Black communities in southern Louisiana who suffer the most loss and damages due to land loss and climate change and who are being actively displaced.

Southern Louisiana is home to large Native communities, including my own, the Houma. While many Houma still live on our ancestral lands, it is the fastest disappearing region in the country. Our lands are unprotected because no Indigenous tribe in the southernmost regions of Louisiana has federal recognition, and the state of Louisiana is heavily invested in fossil fuels.

Oil and gas companies have [long opposed](#) Indigenous tribes in Southern Louisiana achieving federal recognition. They fear that Native people will reclaim the oil-rich, ocean-accessible lands that fossil fuel corporations have been ruining for nearly a century.

Since oil and gas established corporate-colonial occupation over the area in the 1930s, Louisiana has lost more than 2,000 square miles of land. Companies [dredged](#) thousands of

miles of canals through the marsh to get to and from oil and gas wells, carving up Native bayou communities. These canals directly destroy wetlands, disrupt wetland hydrology and act as avenues for salt water intrusion, causing the coastal marshes, our necessary and natural barriers to hurricanes, to rapidly erode.

In Louisiana, on average [a football field of wetlands turns to open water every 100 minutes](#). Plaquemines Parish [alone](#) stands to lose 55% of its land over the next 50 years. The wetlands near Leeville, on Bayou Lafourche, sinks as much as [an inch every 30 months](#).

The Jean Charles Choctaw Nation, which recently changed its name from the Isle de Jean Charles band of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw, a neighboring tribe related to the Houma, recently [relocated from their home island](#) in Terrebonne Parish, which shrunk from its original 35 miles to less than 1 square mile. Elders will tell you that Isle de Jean Charles used to be walkable to Pointe-aux-Chenes, the tiny Houma-French speaking town where my dad was raised and where my family lives. This trek is no longer possible.

Likewise, historically Black communities such as [Ironton](#), a freedmen's town located in Plaquemines Parish, continue to resist displacement. After hurricanes Katrina and Isaac, only about 50 families remain in the community. In 2021, Hurricane Ida scattered dozens of unearthed coffins from Ironton's community cemetery and left few houses unscathed; recovery is ongoing. It is not incidental that Ironton is [surrounded by polluting infrastructure](#), including the 2,400-acre Phillips 66 Alliance oil refinery, a grain terminal, and two coal export terminals. Not far from Ironton, a company called Venture Global is preparing to construct a pipeline and an export terminal, [Plaquemines LNG](#), for liquified natural gas.

Oil and gas companies argue that they are legally allowed to destroy wetlands under state and federal rules put in place decades ago. Over time, the fossil fuel industry has ramped up destructive practices [despite knowing](#) the severe environmental consequences; it has become a wealthy and powerful machine that can [manipulate laws](#) in its favor.

At the same time oil and gas wells and canals are sinking the Louisiana coast, sea levels are rising due to climate change. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has removed the names of [31 bodies of water](#) from their maps of Louisiana as bayou and bay borders disappear and become open water. The Biden Administration's [Inflation Reduction Act](#) will add another layer to these injuries by reinstating [\\$190 million](#) in bids from fossil fuel companies to drill in the Gulf.

At the recent COP27 climate conference, one of the primary points of discussion was sourcing funding for ["loss and damages"](#) from climate change. Environmental leaders from across the world called on colonizing countries such as the United States and European countries to reinstate their extracted wealth to countries in the Global South who have contributed the least to climate change but are experiencing the worst impacts.

Likewise, our conversations around loss and damages here in the United States must include accountability for the rich, extractive, polluting industry that has torn up the Louisiana coast, while [emphasizing a just transition](#). In an essay calling for reparations from oil and gas corporations, New Orleanian artist and researcher Imani Jacqueline Brown invoked the doctrine of ["unjust enrichment."](#) If an entity profits by impoverishing another, then these profits are unjust and must be reinstated.

In October, Shell [reported](#) its second highest quarterly profit ever at \$9.5 billion. Chevron

made \$11.2 billion and Exxon made \$19.7 billion. Despite being an oil and gas state — which is supposed to mean jobs and prosperity, according to fossil fuel corporations — Louisiana is the second poorest state in the United States, with one of the highest racial wealth divides.

I can't tell you in numbers the cost of a dying delta: It is invaluable and irreplaceable. I can tell you that since 1970, the oil and gas industry has raked in [\\$52 trillion](#) in profits, or nearly \$3 billion per day for the last 50 years.

The solution: It's time for oil and gas to pay the costs. These companies owe reparations and need to forfeit their wealth.

It must be acknowledged that successful litigation and money gifts, while necessary, only slow or reframe the problem — they do not change the system that allowed the harm in the first place or guarantee protections from more legal extraction. Our impacted communities need financial reparations to recover from past abuse and brace for future loss and damages as we fight for systemic change. And we should treat those reparations as a means by which to end to the extractive industry, once and for all. It's too cheap for them to exploit us, and, even after major [environmental victories](#), they are set up to do it again.

We need true systemic change. We need [Pachamama](#)—inalienable rights of nature that safeguard our natural environments, from living creatures to our water and air. And ultimately, the government needs to give [land back](#) to Indigenous people, so that Native communities like the Houma can protect their ancestral lands from companies that would plunder them for profit. Our future generations deserve to live on the lands of their elders and ancestors.

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[Courtney Naquin](#) is the Gulf Coast press secretary for Sierra Club and program manager and education coordinator for the Houma Language Project's youth language internship program. They are also a Public Voices on the Climate Crisis fellow with Yale Climate Communications and the Op-Ed Project.

Featured image: The author's grandfather's house in Pointe-Aux-Chenes, Louisiana in the wake of Hurricane Ida. Oil and gas development has contributed to the massive destruction of the state's coastal wetlands, and towns like Pointe-Aux-Chenes are particularly vulnerable to bigger storms and rising seas.

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