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Thursday, Jul 24, 2008

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Posted on Tue, Jul. 22, 2008

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**Wetlands blunt hurricanes, study reveals**

By CAIN BURDEAU  
 THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**NEW ORLEANS** -- Coastal wetlands dramatically reduce the damage from hurricanes and provide an estimated \$23 billion in protection each year to the United States, a new study found.

After looking at the 34 major hurricanes to hit the U.S. since 1980, the researchers discovered that hurricanes that hit swampy areas caused less damage than storms striking rocky and grassy shores.

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"There is a statistically significant relationship: The more wetlands you have in the swath of the hurricane the lower the damages tend to be," said Robert Costanza, one of the paper's researchers and director of the Gund Institute for Ecological Economics at the University of Vermont, on Monday. He specializes in attributing monetary values to nature.

The study, "The Value of Coastal Wetlands for Hurricane Protection," was published in the June edition of AMBIO, a publication of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.

The research paper enters a contested arena among coastal scientists, who disagree about the effect wetlands have against hurricanes.

The new study acknowledges a gap in research to back up the argument that wetlands absorb hurricane energy and reduce a storm's blow, but said their analysis of hurricanes sheds new light on the question.

"There have been many previous estimates of the value of coastal wetlands but estimates of the value for hurricane protection have been few," the study said.

Along the Gulf Coast, the debate has profound implications for policy, especially in Louisiana where the federal government is in the midst of a \$14 billion effort to improve the levees around New Orleans while it also ponders an equally expensive coastal restoration program.

Since Hurricane Katrina hit, the Army Corps of Engineers has worked on levees with a sense of urgency, perhaps at the expense of coastal restoration which has suffered numerous setbacks and not attracted the largesse of Congress.

According to Costanza, over the long-term a wetland - what he refers to as a "horizontal levee" - may actually be more valuable than levees because they tend to replenish themselves while levees sink. In an age of rising sea levels, that is an important difference, he said.

"The wetlands do a lot of other things, too, at the same time. When you start adding all that in you get a lot more bang for your buck. You're getting recreation, you're getting habitat, you're getting nutrient recycling, waste treatment," Costanza said.

Under their model, the researchers valued the coastal wetlands along the coasts of the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico as providing the nation \$23.2 billion in protection each year. The study showed wetlands are most valuable to the South's three biggest coastal cities - Miami, Houston and New Orleans.

The researchers also calculated Hurricane Katrina's toll. Katrina destroyed an estimated 20,000 hectares of wetlands and, according to their calculations, that cost Louisiana an annual loss of \$1.1 billion in storm protection.

Their model attributes a monetary value to each hectare based in large part on the value of the infrastructure lying landward of the wetlands.

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