

# Nutria Wars!

For readers of the Delta Sierran not familiar with the east bank of Jefferson Parish, a short instruction on the geography and history is in order. Fifty years ago, virtually all of East Jefferson north of the Airline Highway was marsh, swamp, or part of Lake Pontchartrain. It was home to muskrats, crabs, and beaucoup birds. About that time, two species of nonindigenous mammals began to inhabit those wetlands. The first was the nutria, the big South American water rat let loose in Louisiana to enhance the fur industry. The muskrat, smaller and more shy than the nutria, left. The second nonindigenous species was homo Jeffersonensis, a territorially aggressive subspecies of homo sapiens. Many, but not all, Jeffersonenses do not have webbed feet, as do the nutrias, and in order to live in the marsh, they had to drain it. In order to drain the marsh and so that real estate developers could reward politicians for their assistance, a great pattern of canals was dug. Homo Jeffersonensis increased rapidly in numbers as the marsh was drained, driving the nutrias into the canals as the nutrias had driven the muskrats out of the parish.

Homo Jeffersonensis has an odd, seemingly paradoxical habit of building levees around the marshes, which results in the water being impounded much like a rice field, then pumping the water out, through or over the levees. All of which provides a lot of public works contracts for politicos to award to friends, relatives, and other supporters of good government. By the 1990's East Jefferson was relatively dry, and everyone assumed that the nutrias had gone for good, that the marsh had ceased to exist, and that homo Jeffersonensis had taken its rightful place high on the food chain.

But then, the nutrias struck back.

The ugly, furry water rats were seen again. Not content to live in peaceful coexistence with humans, the nutrias began to dig. The sides of the drainage canals appealed to them as affordable housing, and holes in the canal walls became sites of domestic and conjugal bliss. The nutrias begat more nutrias. They ignored the garbage and the shopping baskets and the motor oil and other disgusting discards and detritus homo Jeffersonensis dumped into the canals. As the sides of canals deteriorated, the politicians again sprang into action, seeing the opportunity for enterprising supporters of good government to make a buck getting rid of nutrias.

Live trapping was out of the question, probably because it doesn't work as a method of extermination. So someone in

the parish government who had been reading a history of the notorious Borgia family of the Renaissance hit upon the idea of feeding the animals poisoned sweet potatoes. The deadly yams caught the attention of The Slug Huggers League and other animal-rights activists, who pointed out that those arsenic-laced tubers would get pumped into Lake Pontchartrain and poison that body of water even more than it already is.


At this point there entered into The Great Nutria Debate the most colorful (some would say outlandish) figure in Jefferson Parish politics, Sheriff Harry Lee. In a statement clearly dispelling the racist myth of Asian intellectual superiority, Sheriff Lee offered his armed-to-the-teeth S.W.A.T. team to blast away at the despised creatures, not concerned that the nutrias' homes of choice are in densely populated residential neighborhoods. Further laying to rest any myth of Caucasian intellectual superiority, Parish President Yenni agreed to the sheriff's proposal. Before the bullets began to fly, however, the animal rights people stepped in to protect both the nutrias and the people from the governmental shooting gallery. As the Delta Sierran went to press, the nutrias were still digging in the canals, the sheriff had holstered his guns, and the poisoned sweet potatoes were kept out of the canals.

As an aside to this story, the sweet potatoes were stacked up and burned. Macabre author Annie Rice was present at the burning and announced that the event had inspired her next novel, to be called *Interlude At The Yam Pyre*. A

Earl Higgins

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