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OP-ED

What we can learn from Tupelo Meadows

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We Americans have notoriously short attention spans these days for staying focused on major news stories. But most people in North Carolina can still remember the devastation wrought by Hurricane Floyd in 1999, especially now that we've had timely reminders in 2005 from storms Arlene through Beta. It would be hard to forget the scenes of flooded downtowns, houses washed off their foundations, normally tame rivers overtopping high-rise bridges and, of course, the thousands of drowned pigs left floating in the dark waters. One particularly dramatic episode from Floyd that most people don't remember, however, is the horrific damage inflicted upon the Tupelo Meadows resort community by the rushing floods of the lower Roanoke River.

Perhaps the stark images of million-dollar homes buried up to their eaves in oozing brown mud, or of golf carts left dangling in the upper branches of the cypress trees, were just too painful to keep lurking in the backs of our minds.

Or maybe the reason we don't remember the utter destruction wrought upon the residents of Tupelo Meadows is that no such community actually exists. Instead, thanks to decades of cooperative land conservation efforts led by The Nature Conservancy, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and many other public and private partners, more than 60,000 acres of floodplain forest along the lower Roanoke River have been protected from development. As a result, when the Roanoke flooded its banks during and after Hurricane Floyd, there were very few people living in the path of the rising waters. The lack of damage that ensued should have taught us a Zen-like lesson about the value of land conservation for flood damage prevention: "If the river floods and nobody is there to see it, then nothing bad happens."

Buying land and development rights for conservation purposes in floodplains is a fabulously simple and efficient tool for saving human lives, saving money, rescuing endangered species and enhancing opportunities for public recreation.

Ancient human civilizations often depended heavily on the high agricultural productivity of river floodplains for their survival. Presumably, however, these people were smart and flexible enough to pack up their tools and livestock and head for the hills when the water started to rise. In modern times, rather than moving to safety, we keep experimenting with methods of preventing floods with artificial dams and levees, a process that has proven to be always expensive, often lethal, and generally disastrous

(case in point: New Orleans). In contrast, buying up flood-prone lands and turning them into parks, nature preserves, hunt clubs and working forests could potentially save thousands of lives and billions of dollars just in North Carolina alone. Not only do these undeveloped properties preclude the local construction of unsafe housing, they also provide the additional service of slowing and retaining flood waters so that people and property downstream are less likely to be washed away.

It goes without saying that conserving floodplain forests helps ensure the persistence of our native wildlife species. Many of the plants and animals that live in floodplains actually depend on occasional inundation of their habitat for their long-term survival. Creek and riverside habitats also provide natural corridors for the dispersal of animals throughout the landscape. This strong connectivity benefits humans too, as floodplain conservation areas lend themselves easily to the creation of entire networks of urban greenways, canoe paths and hiking trails.

In the end, the take-home message from hurricanes Floyd and Katrina is not that we need to spend more money building and maintaining levees and floodwalls that are doomed to failure. Rather, what these storms must teach us is that the states need to do a better job of keeping people from living in the places most at risk from devastating floods and tidal surges. By far the cheapest and best solution is to prevent these properties from ever being developed in the first place. The North Carolina legislature's recent provision of \$100 million for the Clean Water Management Trust Fund is a great step in the right direction, but bigger and bolder plans for land conservation are in the works. The Land for Tomorrow Coalition (www.landfortomorrow.org) is actively promoting the passage of a billion-dollar bond for conservation funding. This initiative, if successful, will ensure that many future flooding events in North Carolina will be every bit as forgettable as the intense lack of destruction that occurred at Tupelo Meadows during Hurricane Floyd.

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