

Atchafalaya River

While the Mississippi River maybe the largest river here in Louisiana, another major river, the Atchafalaya, has threatened its pre-eminence. The Atchafalaya River is a major distributary of the Mississippi, meaning water from the Mississippi River flows into the Atchafalaya, and then downstream to the Gulf of Mexico. Currently about one-third of the Mississippi's water flows through the Atchafalaya, branching off about 80 miles above Baton Rouge.

If left to Mother Nature, the Mississippi River would have shifted its course to take this shorter course down the Atchafalaya River to the Gulf. Many people did not want this to happen! To prevent a change in the Mississippi's channel, in 1954 Congress authorized the building of a river control structure where the Mississippi, Red and Atchafalaya rivers come together. This structure prevents the main flow of the Mississippi from being diverted to the Atchafalaya.

Why would it be disastrous for the Mississippi to change its course? The southernmost portion of the Mississippi River would become a shallow mud lake and shipping activities along the lower river would be greatly impacted. New Orleans's drinking water would be inundated with salt water from the gulf. And communities along the Atchafalaya could be washed away. Today, millions of dollars are spent to make sure that the Mississippi stays on course.

On both sides of the Atachafalya River in Morgan City, you may notice cement walls that parallel the river. These 21-foot walls are flood walls were constructed to keep the waters out of the low-lying town. During times of high water you may be able to see that the water level of the river is higher than the streets, and in some cases, rooftops, in Morgan City.

To the north of Morgan City is the Atchafalaya Basin, the largest freshwater swamp in the U.S. It is an area some 20 miles wide and about 150 miles in length, and is home to some species of plant and animal life found nowhere else. In the past, many people lived in and subsisted off the resources of the basin swamps, fishing, trapping, or gathering Spanish Moss. Few people live and work there full time now, though it's a major source of Louisiana crawfish production.

Source(s):

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