

A Story Well Told

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Oliver A. Houck, [The Reckoning: Oil and Gas Development in the Louisiana Coastal Zone](#), 28 *Tul. Envtl. L.J.* 185 (2015).

Professor [Oliver Houck](#)'s recent article, [The Reckoning: Oil and Gas Development in the Louisiana Coastal Zone](#), is easily one of the best articles that I have read in the last ten years and should be required reading regardless of one's specialty. I should admit that I am not an environmental law professor and the environmental law articles I ordinarily read are those that intersect with one of my primary research areas: Indian law. So I initially downloaded *The Reckoning* expecting that I would skim it quickly. But it is a remarkable article. Although on its face, the article tells a story of oil and gas development in the fragile wetlands of Louisiana's coast, it also has lessons about political corruption and short-sightedness that extend far beyond the environmental destruction at the heart of the article.

Professor Houck convincingly argues that the state government and oil and gas interests are seen as essentially the same, so much so that Houck refers to them collectively simply as "the company." Louisiana actively courted oil and natural gas development to such an extent that the very state entities tasked with protecting the coastal zone participated in the promotion of development above all else, even above reason. As the article shows, it would be inaccurate to say that the state became the puppet of corporate interests or that it rubber-stamped the web of canals that destroyed the wetlands because nearly every Louisiana institution was and is invested in the rush to please big energy. Problematically, the list of those involved in opening up the wetlands, in denying the connection between development and destruction, and in attempting to shift the restoration costs away from oil and gas companies and onto the American taxpayer includes not only the ironically named Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, which time and again saw itself as an industry partner, but also parish governments, state-university academics and centers, politicians at the federal, state, and local levels, and even major environmental groups. As Professor Houck shows, no part of the Louisiana coast has been spared from devastation caused by "the company," yet "the company" is unwilling to take responsibility and has largely succeeded in avoiding the costs associated with such destruction.

The article tells a remarkable and painful story and it does so in a way that is itself unflinching and remarkable. Professor Houck ends his 112 page article by noting that the work of parsing through the legal arguments in the Levee Board's case against the oil and gas industries was the work of another article. *The Reckoning* is entirely dedicated to providing a rich and well-crafted history of the relationship between oil and gas companies, the state of Louisiana, and the coastal environment. And that singular focus is part of why this is a tremendous contribution. Many, and I would argue *too many*, articles consist of a small dose of observation and a large dose of theory or interpretation. Indeed, I remember vividly being admonished as a pre-tenured professor that my article about [immigrant remittances](#) was not sexy enough because I hadn't dressed it up in theory. It was a mistake I corrected on [a future property law article](#) that I thought would be treated as my last article for tenure. But while the push for theory and for interpretation in the legal academy has its place, I think Professor Houck's careful and thoroughly researched history will do far more to begin correcting course in Louisiana and holding the contributors to the problems there to account than will the many interpretive articles sure to follow. They will surely build off of and cite to *The Reckoning* but Professor Houck's narrative of how "the company" operates in Louisiana is incredibly compelling and damning in its own right. The article will likely be widely read by environmental law professors but it is well worth reading regardless of one's specialty.

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