



## A Wildlife Agent's View of New Orleans After the Storm

by Agent Douglas Anderson Jr.

**A**The morning of Aug. 29, 2005, was the beginning of the tragic flood that the people of New Orleans had feared for years. As some Louisianans would say, "The bowl had finally filled." The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina had set into motion all forms of search and rescue team, including agents from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Enforcement Division. We arrived immediately after the storm had passed through "The Big Easy," and the devastation we found was inconceivable at the time.

We immediately began launching our small aluminum flat bottom boats into the flooded neighborhoods, searching for survivors. Who would have ever thought we would be putting these small vessels into the water by means of an interstate exit ramp? Stranded victims were not hard to find the first few days. It seemed as though every house had someone in its attic or on its roof. The screams for help and the cries for a rescuer's attention came from every direction. They were tired, hungry and desperate for survival. They were trapped and wanted to have the security they once felt before.

The small boats were difficult to maneuver through the flooded streets. The thick darkness of the water made it impossible for us to see obstacles in our path. Submerged vehicles and fences, as well as low-hanging power lines presented a constant threat of

capsizing our vessels. As the days passed, the danger of being infected with an array of waterborne illnesses weighed heavily on everyone's minds. The use of personal protective equipment was a first and foremost priority for all rescuers. The entire city now smelled like death and the pungent odor of sewage seemed to be embedded in our noses. The smell of a flooded city absorbed into everything—our clothes, our hair and even the interiors of the vehicles we had driven there

The disturbing sight of dead bodies and animals was all too common. As time passed, these swollen bodies would float and pass freely through the rivers we once called streets. A time would come when the proper authorities would secure the deceased, but for now we would just have to move on so that survivors could be taken to safety. It was so hard to leave these people lying in ruin, but I knew I had a job to do.

Throughout all of our experiences in this tragedy, the once inconceivable devastation became all too real. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina will go down in the history books, as it created the most damage of any natural disaster on record in the United States. Not a day goes by that I don't think of an event during the time we spent in submerged New Orleans. I can only hope that as time goes by this city will recover and be better than it once was. ■