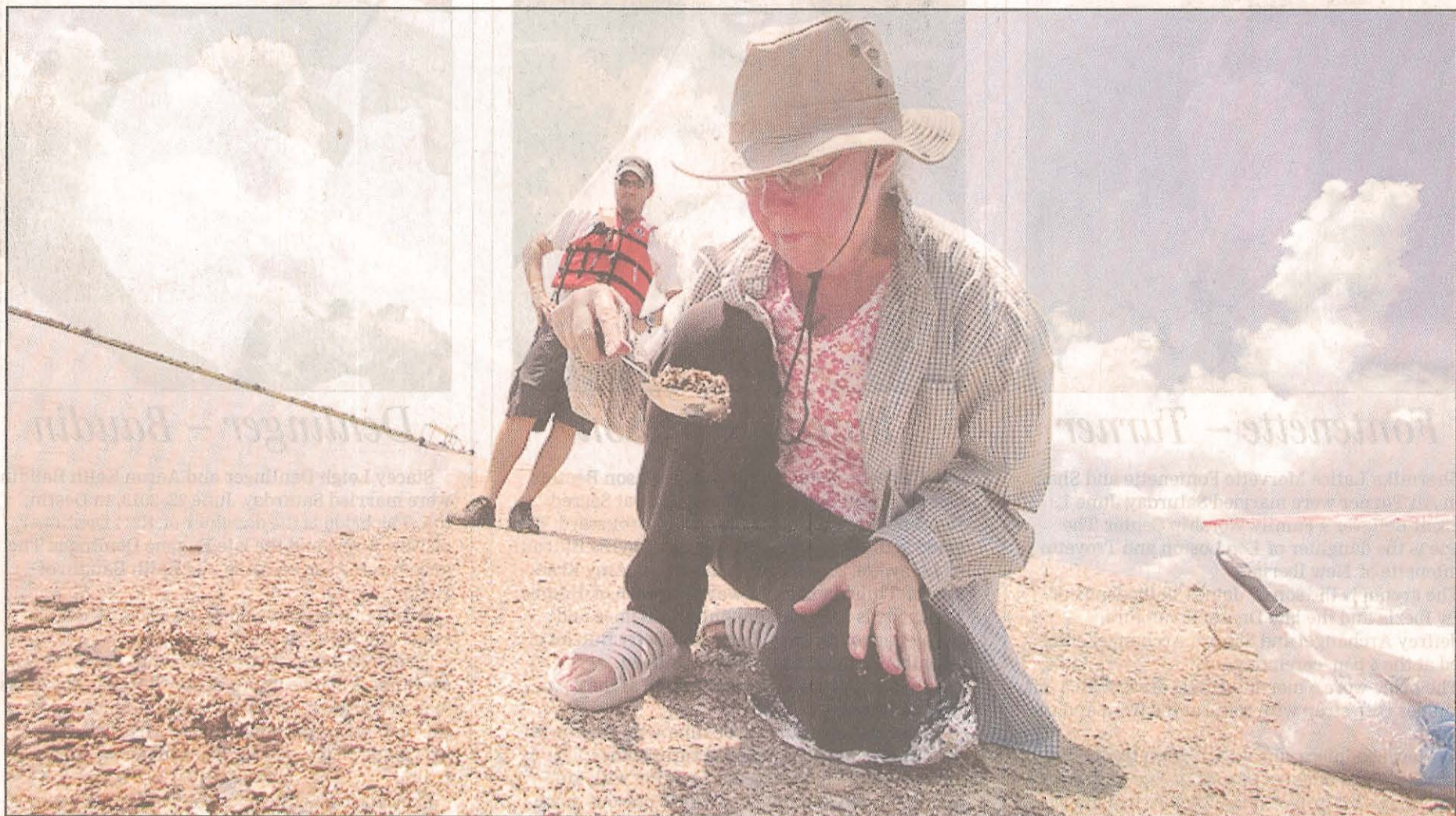


# Teche Life

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Wilma Subra takes samples for testing. Subra, a chemist, is featured in a recently published book.

JEFFREY DUBINSKI / SPECIAL TO THE DAILY IBERIAN.

## Teche pioneers

Three local women tackle environmental issues

BY HOPE RURIK  
THE DAILY IBERIAN

Iberia Parish residents have had their share of environmental fights from asking for better landfill solutions to blocking natural gas cavern expansion. Three local women have had a hand in those fights during the past several decades.

Southern Mutual Help Association CEO Lorna Bourg, SMHA Assistant Executive Director Sister Helen Vinton and Subra Companies owner and scientist Wilma Subra are all featured in "Women Pioneers of the Louisiana Environmental Movement" by Peggy Frankland, published this year by the University Press of Mississippi.

They were a few of about 40 narratives from women involved in environmental battles across the state.

Bourg, originally from Baton Rouge, decided early in her life to go into a convent, which would give her the opportunity to go to college. She said she was the first in her family to go to college.

She left the convent and began attending the University of Southwest Louisiana where she met a nun who hired her as a social worker aide after graduation.

Bourg moved to an impoverished area of Abbeville where she ultimately raised awareness among the residents of the disparities between wealthier and poorer parts of the town and parish.

From that experience rose the Southern Mutual Help Association in the late 1960s.

Vinton went to work for that organization in 1980. Vinton



Helen Vinton and Lorna Bourg travel by helicopter in remote rural coastal areas after Hurricane Katrina to do damage assessments for the South-

ern Mutual Help Association's Rural Recovery Response work. The two were recognized for their environmental work

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was raised by cattle ranchers in Nebraska where she and her family raised and ate much of their own food.

"We were poor, but you wouldn't know we were because we had good food, clean water and air, and we worked hard and had fun," says in the book. "I think the most important thing I learned from my family was to be generous of the heart, and if anything is worthwhile, you will find it hard sometimes."

Combined with her childhood and a college education in Winona, Minn., that immersed her in "environmental stuff," Vinton was uniquely qualified when massive fish kills affected

the state in 1990.

"... it was an opportunity to say that this is something that shouldn't be happening," she says in the book. "And I knew that because I have an agricultural background, and I knew there had to be alternatives to the way farmed was done here and still is, to a large extent."

She and Bourg, through SMHA, worked to examine how pesticides could be used more effectively.

Vinton's focus and that of SMHA has been to build rural communities across the state. She said recently that has meant focusing on shrimpers and fisherman whose livelihood lies in the state's waterways and coast.

She helped to initiate a program to

give these communities access to capital that can be used to outfit boats to be in the Gulf or bays longer, potentially saving on fuel while catching more product.

The goal? To preserve the long-standing coastal cultures and communities of Louisiana as well as the domestic food supply.

Bourg said Vinton and Subra have both served as forces to put forward a new way of doing things whether it's the way pesticides or used or the way oil companies work with the communities where they operate.

Bourg said Subra worked in Lake Charles where residents were complaining about emissions from a local plant. Subra proposed a system that would allow residents to monitor emissions and reports directly

to the company.

Bourg said the program was so effective that the company established the practice in several other communities.

Subra appears twice in the book — first to give her narrative looking back, then a narrative at the end of the book looking at the present and future.

Subra, originally from Morgan City, grew up watching her father, a chemist, and her grandfather, an oyster fisherman.

"We were always doing things with nature, and then when you started to see things, over time, that were impacting people, it was time to do something," Subra says in the book.

During her time with the Gulf South Research Institute from 1967 to 1981, Subra saw a need to provide people with the basis they needed to question rules and regulations. She started her own company to do just that.

She said residents can combine the scientific and factual information provided by her company with what they know and understand about their community to better present their case to local or state government.

Subra's New Iberia office is filled with stacks of documents, each representing ongoing projects.

Subra echoed this week a point she makes in the book, saying Louisiana's environmental weakness is its reliance on oil and gas industries. She said the state not only doesn't have the resources to enforce regulations on the books, but as soon as agencies do enforce, their line item budgets are cut.

"You can only shift it so far as the industry will go along with it," she said.

"Industry is there (in the Legislature) every single day making sure their interests are first and foremost in legisla-



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Helen Vinton and Lorna Bourg are shown at Southern Mutual Help Association. The two are featured in a book because of their work with the association.

**'We were always doing things with nature, and then when you started to see things, over time, that were impacting people, it was time to do something.'**

**Wilma Subra**

Owner of Subra Companies

