The Lake Pontchartrain Watershed is extensive and comprises many diverse habitats. Water moves across fields and through forests as it finds its way to small streams in the forested hills north of the Lake. This same water joins large rivers and bayous as it journeys downward to the gulf. One common factor unifying the entire watershed is that all of its water eventually arrives in a wetland for final filtering and purification before it empties into the Gulf of Mexico.

Wetlands surrounding the Lake Pontchartrain Basin are quite diverse. They range from freshwater, river forests (riparian wetlands) in the northern part of the Basin, through cypress/tupelo swamps in the western and middle portions of the Basin, to fresh, intermediate, and finally brackish and salt marshes in the extreme eastern end. It is easy to tell the difference between swamps and marshes because marshes have no trees. The difference between swamps and river forests and among various marsh types are more difficult to determine. Distinctions are usually determined by the dominant vegetation types.

River forests are made up of mostly trees like bald cypress, tupelo gum, certain types of oak, magnolia, beech, as well as scrubby shrubs like palmetto and wax myrtle. These river forests usually drain into some other type of wetland such as cypress/tupelo swamps or fresh marsh before emptying into Lakes Maurepas or Pontchartrain. Cypress/tupelo swamps, as you might have guessed, are comprised almost exclusively of cypress and tupelo gum trees, but also contain some understory shrubs like button bush and wax myrtle, along with many aquatic plants such as water hyacinths and duckweed as well as semi-aquatic plants like spider lilies, swamp lilies, and irises. Marshes generally have little or no trees, but each marsh type has its own particular vegetation types, such as *Spartina alterniflora*, *Spartina patens*, or *Sagittaria lancifolia*.

Just as each wetland type is characterized by different kinds of vegetation, each wetland type is also home to particular kinds of animals and plants adapted to living in these special habitats. Some of them are being outcompeted for resources of food, sunlight, space, and shelter by exotic or introduced species. Others have become endangered or threatened due to habitat destruction or water pollution. Following is an activity that will focus student attention on this issue.