



Come Hell or High Water

The Battle for Turkey Creek

2013 • Running time 60 minutes • Directed by Leah Mahan • Distributed by Bullfrog Films

Come High or Hell Water tells the story of Turkey Creek, a community on the Mississippi Gulf Coast settled by former slaves after the Civil War. Since the area was settled, the city of Gulfport has expanded and now surrounds this historic community and the associated riparian and wetland areas. The film tells the personal story of one resident, Derrick Evans, who returns home to collect the stories of an older generation and document the history of the community. But over time, he is transformed into an environmental activist as he helps the community recover from Hurricane Katrina and contend with developers who are eager to buy up the property and drain the wetlands. The community responds with a range of tactics, including historical preservation, conservation easements, and activism through rallying public support. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that fighting for environmental justice is an integral part of the struggle for self-determination and sustainable development.

TEACHER'S GUIDE



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Face to Face Media 2019



Come Hell or High Water: The Battle for Turkey Creek



Curator and Writers

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WHY WE SELECTED THIS FILM

The importance of *Come High or Hell Water* lives in its ability to draw connections between civil rights and responsible urban development, environmental conservation, and environmental disaster relief and recovery. The film highlights the personal experiences of local grassroots activists, including their respective strategies for working toward justice in the Turkey Creek community.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Activism	Oceans and Coasts
African-American Studies	Race and Racism
Democracy	Sociology
Environmental Justice	Wetlands
North American Studies	

BACKGROUND AND SYNOPSIS

Part 1. *To Be Recognized* 00:00–17:30

The first 20 minutes of the film introduce Derrick Evans and the Turkey Creek community. We learn that Turkey Creek was founded by emancipated slaves post-Civil War during Reconstruction. The first four founding couples traveled to the Mississippi Gulf Coast and settled along the banks of the creek. After they came, more followed. Some families sold their land to a creosote company, which for decades created both local jobs and poisonous working conditions for Turkey Creek residents. (A supplemental companion film explores the consequences of this toxic legacy in more detail.) During Derrick's first visit home, we are introduced to the Turkey Creek community's fight to be recognized as a historically significant site and as a neighborhood worthy of environmental protection and fair development practices.

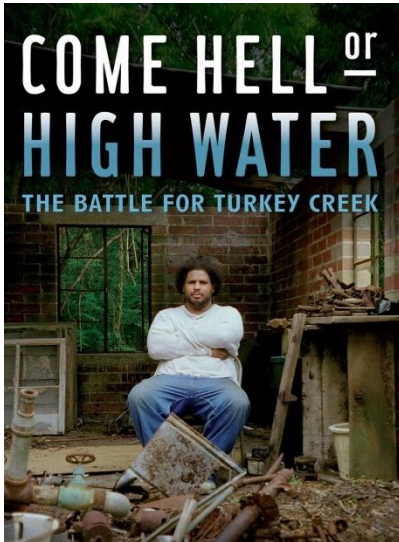
Part 2 *Time to Stand Up* 17:30–35:40

Derrick and the residents of Turkey Creek hear from developers and city council members about plans for development in their neighborhood. This film segment highlights community resistance and includes footage of Turkey Creek residents explaining why they oppose not only development of the wetlands but also any attempts to displace neighbors from their homes.

Part 3 *Katrina* 35:40–47:55

Katrina hits the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and Derrick heads back down to Turkey Creek to support the recovery efforts. Attention shifts, for the moment, to storm relief and rebuilding. Responding to the unfair allocation of FEMA recovery funds, Derrick transforms community frustration into a national platform to advocate just and ecologically sound development.

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“A powerful film for all those interested in social and environmental justice.”

—Stephen L. Hupp, Library Journal

“Viewers will be touched by Evans’s courage and self-sacrifice and gain insight into the region’s historical, environmental, and racial issues.”

—Candace Smith, Booklist

Part 4 *Derrick’s Lessons Learned* 47:55–end

As Turkey Creek struggles to rebuild after the destruction of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and is simultaneously confronted with new development proposals, the community also experiences two momentous victories—the neighborhood is placed on the National Register of Historic Places, and nearly 200 acres of creek-adjacent land are preserved in a local land trust as urban greenway. As the film wraps up, attention is given to the emotional, physical, and financial toll that activism has taken on Derrick and the lessons he has learned from more than a decade of environmental justice work in Turkey Creek.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

Set in an African-American community on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, *Come High or Hell Water* (CHHW) explores the connections between civil rights and environmental justice. The film provides a platform for investigating issues corresponding to three types of justice: distributive justice, recognition justice, and procedural justice.

CHHW highlights distributive justice through efforts to reverse the unequal distribution of environmental burdens on the African-American residents of Turkey Creek. These burdens include the loss of land and culturally significant sites, environmental degradation, and increased flooding.

Recognition justice involves efforts to recognize Turkey Creek as a historically significant community deserving of federal recognition, an environmental resource deserving of conservation, and a community deserving of adequate FEMA Katrina relief and recovery resources.

The film also highlights procedural justice through efforts to improve and increase participation in a wide range of public decision-making processes affecting the Turkey Creek community.

REVIEWS

“This intimate film tells a gigantic story...It’s about everything that matters in our society.” —Bill Bigelow, *Rethinking Schools*

“We highly recommend this documentary film about a middle school teacher who leads an environmental justice battle in a historic African-American community in Mississippi.” —Deborah Menkart, Teaching for Change

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“Exposes raw, in-your-face Mississippi politics...a perfect lesson that we are not living in a post-racial era.” —Dr. Robert Bullard, dean, School of Public Affairs, Texas Southern University

“A powerful story of one man’s good fight.” —C. Cassady, *Video Librarian*

“The language of power and oppression is omnipresent in *Come Hell or High Water*, and it doesn’t get any better as Katrina pounds Gulfport in 2005. Still no better when the BP oil disaster happens five years after that. The documentary captures Turkey Creek’s responses to all these tragedies—and a few remarkable victories against the powers that be.”

—Brentin Mock, *Grist*

KEY LOCATIONS AND PEOPLE

Turkey Creek – a historic neighborhood on Mississippi’s Gulf Coast, named for the creek that runs through it. The community was founded by emancipated African-Americans in 1866 during the Reconstruction era. Turkey Creek is now considered a part of North Gulfport, Mississippi, and the community was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2007.

Derrick Evans – a Turkey Creek native, teacher, and activist

Leah Mahan – a filmmaker and narrator

Eva Skinner (Miss Eva) – a community elder and Turkey Creek resident

Rev. Edward C. Moses – the reverend of Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church

Rose Johnson – a Mississippi Sierra Club activist

Ken Combs – the mayor of Gulfport, Mississippi

Butch Ward – a developer



SELECTED EXCERPTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Where time is short, one of the following sequences may be assigned for viewing or shown in class.

Film sequence: *To Be Recognized* 12:00–17:30

Watch a short selection about development

Derrick and Miss Eva (an elderly Turkey Creek resident) visit the grave of her son to find out that the graveyard has been covered by a new condo housing development. Both the Gulfport mayor and city councilor deny responsibility for knowingly developing over gravesites. This section includes footage of Derrick in his classroom, talking to the students about how development can be a good thing when it benefits the local community.

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Discussion questions for this excerpt

1. Derrick explains in his classroom: “You know, we talked about racism. It’s not simply a function of ignorance. Because if it was simply a function of ignorance, it could be educated away and it would be over. No, racism is probably the most profitable invention of the last 500 years.” What does Derrick mean by this? Who profits from racism? How might some people (especially those with more privilege and/or power) “profit” from racism? How can we relate these ideas back to the environment and environmental justice?
2. What is Miss Eva’s experience at the graveyard? How is her experience reflective of larger patterns in Turkey Creek, the city of Gulfport, and beyond?
3. What are the goals of “just development”? What is protected when development is done in a just way? What is sacrificed when it is done in an unjust way in Turkey Creek? Elsewhere?

Film sequence: *Time to Stand Up*

Watch two short selections about Turkey Creek residents organizing.

- **Part 1** 22:12–26:22

Derrick describes his plan to use a historical preservation initiative to protect the Turkey Creek community. Turkey Creek residents speak out against plans for development and displacement at a public meeting.

- **Part 2** 31:17–35:42

Turkey Creek community activists respond to the City of Gulfport’s latest act of environmental degradation —the complete clearing of vegetation along large stretches of creek bed. They begin to form a plan for “reclaiming the creek” and creating an urban greenway.



Discussion questions for these excerpts

1. What benefits do wetlands provide to a community and an ecosystem? What are some of the potential social and environmental consequences of filling in wetlands? What do local Turkey Creek residents Rose Johnson and Gaynette Pew say about how filling in wetlands could affect their community?
2. What are the attitudes of the developer and city officials toward the community’s concern about plans to fill in hundreds of acres of wetlands? What do these two attitudes tell you about how the Turkey Creek community has been recognized and treated by the local government and developers?

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3. *Eminent domain* is defined as “the power to take private property for public use by a state, municipality, or private person or corporation authorized to exercise functions of public character, following the payment of just compensation to the owner of that property” (<https://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/>). In the case of Butch Ward and the developers in Turkey Creek, what do they understand as the land’s highest potential for public use? What about the community in Turkey Creek? Why do you think these two understandings are at odds with one another? What would “just compensation” look like for people’s private property? Is there such a thing as “just compensation” in this case?
4. What are some of the tactics the Turkey Creek community uses to battle the development corporations trying to displace them?
5. What is a conservation easement? What does it mean to put a piece of land into conservation for perpetuity? What could be the long-term benefits of this kind of plan? What might be some possible downsides? Who are the different stakeholders that would need to work together to make a conservation plan like this work? How does this environmental project help promote a social justice agenda in Turkey Creek?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE FILM AS A WHOLE

1. What publicly funded projects are undertaken in the name of hurricane recovery? Why does Derrick think some of these projects may have been poorly planned and poorly designed? What are the alternatives that Derrick and fellow organizers propose?
2. What additional tactics are used by the Turkey Creek community to protect their rights and their land from degradation?
3. What is FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency)? What services do they provide? Where did much of the FEMA funding go in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina?
4. What are some of the bittersweet “wins” for the Turkey Creek community? What are some of the new threats to the Turkey Creek conservation efforts? How does Derrick strategically use these threats to the community’s advantage?



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What is the relationship between the “traditional” environmental movement and the environmental justice movement?



5. Derrick's mother expresses fear for her son while he "visions" and fights to protect the Turkey Creek community. She explains, "I respect what he's doing, but my son is not on salary. And we have to survive. And sometimes, just to keep a positive attitude, we tend to go into denial because we have to live." How has Derrick's life been affected as he fights for justice and environmental protection in Turkey Creek? How might Derrick's story relate to other fights for social and/or environmental justice elsewhere?
6. After the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Derrick picks up the phone to discuss a community disaster response. What are some pieces of wisdom that he shares? How do his recommendations relate to notions of justice?
7. One passage in the "Earth Day" article referred to in the film reads: "[Derrick] Evans, a community activist, says repeated appeals to local officials to halt harmful projects went unanswered. He says, 'Things finally started going our way' when he realized that Turkey Creek was a haven for tropical birds, and he reached out to conservation groups such as the Audubon Society that, he says, had the legal resources to help. 'It's as if people cared more about birds than African-Americans...It shouldn't have to be so hard.'" What does this passage say about the relationship between the "traditional" environmental movement and the environmental justice movement? Based on what you've seen in *Come High or Hell Water* and in your personal work/studies, when are these two components of the environmental movement at odds with one another? When do they (or should they) work in synchrony toward a common goal?

ACTIVITIES

1. Have students watch the 5-minute film [Toxic Legacy](#) online and respond to the following questions (which may require additional research): What is creosote, and what was it used for? What are the impacts creosote can have (and has had) on human health? What are some of the consequences the Turkey Creek community may have experienced from living with a toxic site in their neighborhood? What is a federally recognized toxic Superfund site? What is the toxic Superfund site nearest to your school or hometown? What are some of the environmental health burdens associated with the environmental toxin in question?

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2. Have students attend a public meeting nearby. Ask them to pay attention to the public process and power dynamics at play. They should reflect upon the following questions: What is the purpose of the meeting? Who is in the room? What decisions are being made? Whose voices are heard and considered? Whose are ignored? How would you compare this public process with those you saw in *Come High or Hell Water*?
3. As a class, develop a list of all the tactics used by Derrick and his fellow community activists to fight unfair development in Turkey Creek. Ask students to choose one of those tactics and research two other social/environmental justice causes that have used a similar approach. Compare and contrast how these tactics played out in different contexts.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Websites

[Come High or Hell Water: The Battle for Turkey Creek](#)

Official film website, including extra learning resources, multimedia, and related news

[National Eminent Domain Power](#)

Relevant legal information about eminent domain (FindLaw.com)

[Conserve Your Land – Frequently Asked Questions](#)

Relevant information about conservation easements and land trusts (Land Trust Alliance)

[Turkey Creek Watershed](#)

A description and history of the Turkey Creek watershed (Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain)

[Bridge the Gulf: Turkey Creek](#)

A community media project (co-founded by Derrick Evans) that lifts up the voices of Gulf Coast communities working toward justice and sustainability (Bridge the Gulf Project)

Videos

[Environmental Justice Explained](#)

A short introduction to the principles of environmental justice (2016, *Grist*)

[A Brief History of Environmental Justice](#)

A short introduction to the principles of environmental justice (2017, ProPublica)

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[Toxic Legacy](#)

A companion film to *Come High or Hell Water*, using first-person interviews, archival footage, and historical research to explore the local environmental and human health impacts of the creosote industry in Turkey Creek (2014, ITVS)

[Public Interest Environmental Law Conference, Keynote Address](#)

Derrick Evans's keynote address about the importance of using legal strategies to achieve social and environmental justice (2015)

Print Media

[Turkey Creek: Preview and Q & A with Filmmaker Leah Mahan](#)

(2007, *Bill Moyers Journal*, PBS)

[For Them, Earth Day Was Late in Coming](#)

The newspaper article featured in the film, exploring some of the intersections between mainstream environmental conservation, environmental racism, and the story of Turkey Creek (Brian Winter, *USA Today*)

[Profile of Environmental Justice Activist Rose Johnson](#)

A profile of Rose Johnson, North Gulfport Community Land Trust founder and local Turkey Creek activist featured in the film (2012, *Sierra Club Scrapbook*)

[The J Word: Why Mainstream Environmentalists \(and People\) Fear Environmental Justice](#)

A few real-talk recommendations for mainstream environmentalists who are trying to be better allies in the environmental justice movement (Falon Shackelford, 2012, Power Shift Network)

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[Are There Two Different Versions of Environmentalism, One “White,” One “Black”?](#)

A critique about the way that environmentalists who are people of color are represented in the mainstream environmental movement (Brentin Mock, 2014, *Mother Jones*)

[10 Years After Katrina](#)

A multimedia piece of journalism exploring the intersection of race and class in post-Katrina recovery across the different neighborhoods of New Orleans (Campbell Robertson and Richard Fausset, 2015, *The New York Times*)

[After the Deluge: Building Climate Justice from the Wreckage of Hurricane Katrina](#)

A discussion about climate justice and post-Hurricane recovery, with the story of Derrick Evans and Turkey Creek as a case study (Alexander Zaitchik, 2015, *The New Republic*)

[Environmentalism Was Once a Social Justice Movement: It Can Be Again](#)

An exploration of mainstream environmentalism and environmental justice through the lens of law and litigation (Jedediah Purdy, 2016, *The Atlantic*)

[We can't truly protect the environment unless we tackle social justice issues, too: People of color continue to live closer to environmental hazards](#)

A good short overview of the environmental justice movement (Amal Ahmed, 2018, *Popular Science*)

Academic Reports

[Environmental Justice Through the Eye of Hurricane Katrina](#)

A report about the impacts of Hurricane Katrina on coastal Mississippi through an environmental justice lens, with Turkey Creek used as a case study (Reilly Morse, 2008, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Health Policy Institute)

[The Power of Community Action: Environmental Injustice and Participatory Democracy in Mississippi](#)

An academic article about environmental justice through a civil rights law lens, with Turkey Creek used as a case study (April Hendricks Killcreas, 2012, *Mississippi Law Journal*)

Other

[National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Turkey Creek Community Historic District](#)

A full application, including local history and architectural descriptions (2007, United States Department of the Interior National Park Service)