



CTA-074-Coastal Plan-Texas

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A Texan plan for the Texas coast

By Jim Blackburn

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Photo: Kathy Adams Clark



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The Port Aransas Whooping Crane Festival is a place to see whooping cranes and other birds that winter on the central Texas coast.

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The Texas coast is my place, a place of soft mud and hardheaded people. It is a place of natural wonder, of neotropical songbirds and endangered whooping cranes, a place of marshes and shrimp, a fisherman's paradise. It is also the global center of the oil, gas, and plastics businesses and home to major real estate development in and around Houston. This region is facing long-term problems that threaten its ecology as well as its economy and social structure. It lacks resilience on all levels. Yet on a good day, I see solutions to these challenges, solutions applicable throughout the United States and the world. And today is a good day.

We are living in a time when the Earth is filling up with humans and human impacts, yet we have value sets, policies, and thinking that were developed during a time when the world was relatively empty of people and impacts. My favorite economist, Herman Daly, wrote about the distinction between empty-world thinking and full-world thinking. The empty world is what our parents and especially their parents and grandparents were born into - a world that was relatively empty of humans and human impacts, a world where there was always a perceived frontier.

Today there is a different type of frontier. If we are to flourish over the next century, we will need to adapt to the realities of the "full world." We will need to "settle" this new frontier.

The Texas coast will be affected by these "full world" realities. If we are opportunistic and apply ourselves, this transition to the full world will open up opportunities for actions and strategies that can lead to long-term coastal protection and even enhance the coast over its current situation, moving from minimization of impact to regeneration. But like many aspects of life, realizing these opportunities will require leadership and creativity and bold action.

This new frontier - the full world - is one where resources are limited, where every gallon of water counts, where every ton of carbon dioxide is tracked, where the successful companies are those that combine economic, ecological, and social thinking. Today, our systems and our thinking are still firmly rooted in a time of expansion, whereas our reality is becoming quite different. Our challenge will be to sustain and maintain an economy that creates optimism and maintains our quality of life, and our values generally, as the game changes.

The Texas coast is different in some aspects from other areas of the U.S. as well as different parts of the world. We on the Texas coast cannot depend on government regulation to solve these problems (if it could). Texans don't like regulation and are unlikely to pass new government regulations to protect the coast. If we are going to save this wonderful resource for future generations, it will be because we are creative and nimble, something that government regulation often is not. We in Texas may be in a better position to accept this change than those in many other parts of the world simply because we are so obstinate about government and so accepting of independent thinking and entrepreneurship.

By understanding and talking about money and economics as well as water, ecology, climate change, eco-play, and spirituality along with the future of the oil and gas business, carbon neutrality, and a circular economy, a path to a healthy Texas coast can be discerned as we head into the future.

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Money and economic thinking have key roles to play in the long-term protection and restoration of the Texas coast. I realize this after years of disputes and after years of working with proponents of our coastal assets, both green (natural) and gray (built). In many respects, the future is about the green and gray coming together, merging, cooperating, problem solving together.

I often think that as goes Texas so goes the Earth, because if we can find solutions here, they should work anywhere in the world. And if we fail here, it likely foretells setbacks elsewhere. This view of the world through a Texas lens assumes that in order to address our most pressing global issues, we must find solutions that work for the most difficult and intractable regions. And Texas is such a region.

The problems of the Texas coast are those that come from placing a linear economic system based on use and consumption upon a natural system that works in a different way, a natural system with rhythms, cycles, and limits. When resources and assets were not limited, these issues were not as pronounced, but they are emerging as we face resource and pollution absorption limits. As a society, we are forcing the square peg of our economic model into the round hole of the natural system of the Texas coast, and they do not match well heading into the future.

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Viewed a certain way, this book presents a plan for the future of the Texas coast. But it is different from past plans. [T]his is a plan based on market economics and personal commitment and action. It is about protecting the coast with a set of tools that are consistent with the norms that prevail in Texas and on the Texas coast. In that sense it presents a different and perhaps new view of coastal planning.

Blackburn is a professor in the practice of environmental law in the civil and environmental engineering department at Rice University. He is also the codirector of the Severe Storm Prediction Education and Evacuation from Disaster Center. "A Texan Plan For The Texas Coast" has been published by Texas A&M University Press and will be available in November.

Long before Hurricane Harvey churned up the Gulf of Mexico, conservationist and environmental lawyer Jim Blackburn was warning anybody who would listen that the Texas coast was in danger of being damaged beyond repair. After decades of visiting with people who live and work along the coast, Blackburn has learned that when he talks about saving the environment in monetary terms, people listen. His new book, "A Texan Plan for the Texas Coast," makes the unconventional case that any successful strategy for saving the coast needs to be about making money.

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