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News & Opinion » Editor's Note

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Editor's Note: Saving the whales = bridging partisan divide?

By Jim Morekis

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IN AN age of an almost unbridgeable partisan divide, our region has seen a remarkable political consensus on the issue of offshore drilling.

Specifically and most recently, the issue of seismic airgun testing, a brutal prelude to many types of offshore drilling.

A distant cousin to sonar, seismic airgun blasting is delivered by vessels towing large arrays of airguns behind them. They blast the ocean every 10–15 seconds, often 24 hours a day, to receive a bounced-back sonic picture of the substrates on the ocean floor — the blueprint for drilling.

The blasts can be heard thousands of miles away. The sound waves hit at about 250 decibels; a jet engine 100 feet away is 140 decibels by comparison.

There's an old trope about fishing with a hand grenade; the blast delivers fish to the top of the water, stunned or killed by the concussion. That's an exaggerated description of the effect of seismic airgun tests — in fact, before seismic airguns were developed, actual dynamite was used.

The concussive waves from seismic airguns can seriously disrupt the hearing and navigational senses of all types of marine life, especially marine mammals.

Those on the Georgia coast are fond of our North Atlantic Right Whales, who bear their calves in the winter off our coast.

Already endangered —mostly due to increased shipping activity to the Port of Savannah and other regional ports — the Right Whales are in a serious birth decline.

With only about 400 left on the planet, seismic airgun testing could be what tips them over the edge into extinction.

It's not just whales — fish stock declines wherever airgun surveys are conducted, eggs and larvae killed by blasts, adults and juveniles scared from feeding grounds.



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Editor's Note: After The Gold Rush

2018 was the biggest year on record for commercial development in Savannah. In all, \$547 million in new projects were permitted.

Even the inventor of the seismic airgun, geophysicist Stephen Chelminski, has voiced his regrets, and is now working on patenting a quieter version.

The political aspect has to do with, you guessed it, Donald Trump. In April 2017, the Trump administration overturned an Obama-era denial of all pending permits for such activity in the Atlantic.

Just last month, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) issued permits to five companies to begin seismic airgun blasting.

Last week, a wide-ranging lawsuit was filed against the NMFS to reverse the issuance of the permits.

The groups Oceana, Center for Biological Diversity, National Resources Defense Council, the Southern Environmental Law Center (on behalf of South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, North Carolina Coastal Federation, One Hundred Miles, Defenders of Wildlife) and Earthjustice (on behalf of Surfrider Foundation and Sierra Club) are plaintiffs.

What's interesting is not just the wide array of environmental groups suing, but who is supporting the lawsuit. Some of the most important elected officials of both parties here have signaled opposition to seismic testing, including Rep. Ron Stephens (R-Pooler), State Sen. Lester Jackson (D-Savannah), and Tybee Island Mayor Jason Buelterman, a Republican.

Even uber-conservative Governor-Elect Brian Kemp has gone on record opposing offshore drilling off the Georgia coast.

However, Savannah Congressman Buddy Carter (R-Pooler) has stated he is in favor of seismic airgun testing.

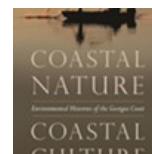
In addition, practically the entire coastal delegation of South Carolina supports the lawsuit, including Congressman-Elect Joe Cunningham (D-Charleston), who defeated Trump acolyte Katie Arrington in last month's election.

Cunningham has unique insight.

"As a former ocean engineer I know how destructive offshore drilling can be," Cunningham said at a press conference in Charleston last week.

Cunningham said the first bill he will sponsor when he takes office next month will be a bill to reverse the Trump administration's backing of the policy.

Meanwhile, the North Atlantic Right Whales are gathering as best they can, in their dwindling numbers, off the Georgia coast. The wait is on to see if they will have any babies at all this year.



Editor's Note: Celebrate the environmental history of the Georgia coast

That history will be celebrated this Thursday in a remarkable event which launches a wonderful new anthology, *Coastal Nature, Coastal Culture: Environmental Histories of the Georgia Coast*, and celebrates the 106th birthday of Sandy West, the matriarch responsible for ensuring Ossabaw's conservation.



Editor's Note: Saving the Seaboard, and political news

The time to save the Seaboard Freight Station was quite some time ago, when citizen pressure could have been a real game-changer. We're now reduced to throwing a Hail Mary late in the game.

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Bio:

A native Savannahian, Jim has been editor-in-chief of Connect Savannah for 15 years. The University of Georgia graduate is also a travel writer, authoring regional guides in the Moon handbook series... [more](#)

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