

## **An Appeal to the Environmental Community to Support the Cape Wind Project**

by Charles Komanoff

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Dear colleague —

A wind energy project proposed for Nantucket Sound has run into heated opposition. This is not surprising in itself; what is surprising is that the opposition has draped itself in the flag of “environmentalism.” I believe that this misappropriation of our cause is harming the progress of renewable energy and may prove damaging to the larger environmental movement as well. **I am appealing to U.S. environmentalists to make clear that they strongly support the Cape Wind project as a key element of developing large-scale wind power throughout the United States.**

To be sure, there may be important issues to be negotiated for the project, ranging from the precise siting of the wind turbines to regulatory standards for development on the outer continental shelf. But I think it would be tragic if these issues became a pretext for stopping or significantly shrinking the project.

Wind power is the only non-polluting means of generating energy that is commercially available on a large scale and can satisfy the so-called “market” criteria that govern U.S. energy supply and demand now and for the foreseeable future. Wind turbines such as those proposed for Nantucket Sound are thus the only currently viable means of providing commercial quantities of energy without destroying whole ecosystems or massively polluting our air, water and land. The Cape Wind developers anticipate producing roughly 1.5 billion kilowatt-hours a year from 420 megawatts of capacity; each unit of output will substitute 1-for-1 for the fossil-fuel mining and burning that constitutes the bulk of present energy systems both locally in New England and throughout the world.

In light of the destructiveness of all fossil-fuel extraction and power generation — which is well understood by every environmentalist — it seems clear that the Cape Wind farm will be extremely beneficial to the environment on an overall net basis. No less an authority than Dr. George Woodwell — founder and director of the Woods Hole Research Center, president emeritus of the Ecological Society of America and former board chair of the World Wildlife Fund — has stated that he does not expect the project to pose a dire threat to the region’s rich bird life, and certainly not in comparison to the damage now being wreaked by the fossil fuels that the project will displace. The same holds for marine mammals and other wildlife.

Yet the home page of the Web site of the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound, which opposes the project, recently carried the following quote from a prominent environmental lawyer: “[The Cape Wind project will] injure a ... valuable tourist industry [and] destroy a resource which is ... a part of the commons ... our nation’s history ... and the maritime and the nautical tradition of Massachusetts.” However, Nantucket Sound, to which the lawyer presumably referred, will be largely untouched by the project.

The Sound covers at least 300 square miles, whereas only 28 square miles — less than one-tenth of the Sound's overall expanse — will be disturbed, according to the alliance. And within that disturbed area, each turbine will lie at the center of a considerable open area, roughly one hundred acres of sea. (This assumes that the 170 turbines are distributed evenly in the 28 square miles; clustering them would reduce the total impact by allowing even more of the Sound to remain undisturbed.) Considering both the small share of the Sound that the wind farm will occupy and the large elbow room for each turbine, the environmental lawyer's alarm strikes me as disproportionate, to say the least.

More importantly, consider the tremendous prospective benefits of the Cape Wind project. If the turbines perform as anticipated, they will displace the energy equivalent of more than two million barrels of oil a year. In energy terms, that is comparable to one fully loaded *Exxon Valdez* every seven months. In just 80 days of operation the wind farm will generate energy equivalent to the entire cargo of the shattered oil tanker *Prestige* — oil that is now befouling over 500 miles of the Spanish coast and killing Atlantic bird and sea life on a vast scale. And while Cape Wind electricity will actually displace a mix of fossil fuels, each week the project does *not* operate will result in existing power plants putting another 20,000 tons of carbon dioxide into Earth's atmosphere, with all the catastrophic consequences that we understand too well.

It is no exaggeration to say that humanity's and the Earth's prospects depend on a move to renewable energy. Fortunately, real progress has been made, particularly in wind power. The world wind industry appears to have finally attained critical mass. More than a dozen manufacturers now sell utility-scale wind turbines to developers in at least 20 countries, and installed global capacity has tripled in just five years, from 1995 to 2000.

But deployment of wind turbines has been slower in the U.S., and progress remains dependent upon strong public support so that tax breaks can offset subsidies to fossil fuels and wind farms can be sited in suitably windy areas. If the first-ever large-scale wind power project proposed for the eastern United States is stopped — and stopped in the name of “environmentalism” — this debacle will significantly slow the development of wind power, just when we need it to accelerate.

To be sure, 170 wind towers will set a clear human imprint on Cape Cod's seascape. We can all agree that wild nature is precious and that its continued presence is essential to human happiness. Dave Brower's plea for wilderness, “that a wide, spacious, untrammled freedom shall remain in the midst of the American earth,” drew me into the environmental movement over 30 years ago and continues to motivate my work and shape my life.

But the majesty of the Cape and Sound will survive the Cape Wind project. The maximum visual height of the turbines will be slightly more than one degree from the very nearest point on Cape Cod, Point Gammon; significantly less elsewhere on the Cape; and a little less than half-a-degree from Martha's Vineyard and a quarter-degree from Nantucket. In other words, from the very

nearest point on land, the tallest tower could be covered twice over with the width of your fingertip held at arm's length, and would be even less conspicuous from any other shore point. Moreover, Nantucket Sound hasn't been a pristine place for centuries. It is already a very heavily humanized stretch of water, though no less beautiful for that. Indeed, it is this fact — that a humanized world need not be an ugly one — that shows us, perhaps, the way forward.

We should appeal to the people of Cape Cod and the Cape Islands to try to cultivate a broader feeling with regard to the Cape Wind project — to regard the wind turbines not as incursions on their view but as a visible measure of their taking responsibility for living on this planet. Indeed, I would urge them to go further still, and not merely tolerate the windmills, but learn to like them, to see them as beautiful emblems of humankind's new commitment to live harmoniously in the natural world.

I offer a numerical comparison to help them do so. With the Cape Wind farm in place, Nantucket Sound's *energy density* — the amount of energy being extracted per unit area — will rise to the current level for the U.S. as a whole. Briefly: the lower 48 states cover 10,000 times as much area as the Sound, and they contain power plants generating 2,500 times as much electricity as Cape Wind is projected to produce; while this suggests that the project will give Nantucket Sound a four-fold higher *electricity* density than the rest of the country, we must also remember that total U.S. *energy* use — by cars, planes, factories, etc. — is roughly triple that of *electricity* alone. This leaves the Sound, with the windmills, with a slightly (one-third) higher energy density than the U.S. as a whole.

Is that not a lovely result? The communities around Nantucket Sound will be assuming their share, plus a little extra, of the burden for the energy we Americans use. The citizens of Cape Cod and the Cape Islands will then have moral authority to demand an energy policy based on wind and sunlight. They will have “walked the talk.” If they wish — and I hope they will — they will have the credentials to become renewable-energy ambassadors to the nation and the world. And they will have done their bit with comparatively little sacrifice: they will have no infernally polluting fossil or nuclear sources, just some tall, elegant blades that spin quietly and miraculously draw energy from the air.

Let us be clear that it won't suffice to propose other sites for the turbines, or to posit energy-efficiency measures that might save energy equaling their output. The Cape Wind project is nearly ready to go, whereas there is no assurance that these alternatives would actually materialize (and hard experience tells us that they probably will not). More fundamentally, we need these other steps, multiplied many-fold, *in addition to* the Cape Wind farm, if we as a people are to actually make the transition from fossil fuels.

If all this isn't enough reason to support the Cape Wind project, consider this: In recent years we environmentalists increasingly have been disparaged as “bait-and-switch” artists who talk one way and, when crunch comes, act another. The spectacle of environmentalists exhibiting the most glaring kind of NIMBYism in this highly visible controversy will tend to discredit not just the cause of renewable energy but the entire environmental movement.

John Muir famously said, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.” And so it is with energy production on today’s terrible scale, and also with its antidotes.

Through dependence on fossil fuels, humankind has come to a point where an “unspoiled” Nantucket Sound is inescapably linked to spoiled climate, water, air and lungs elsewhere, and to global violence and terror. Conversely, Nantucket Sound with its clean, quiet, graceful windmills would show the way out of this dependence and to the recovery and continuance of our world.

If by accepting a modest, largely aesthetic change in the landscape we can heal the Earth to this great extent, how in conscience can we not do so?

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*If you agree with this statement, or at least its bottom line, please express your support for the Cape Wind project as an individual and, if applicable, on behalf of your organization, to the Army Corps of Engineers (which must permit the project) and both U.S. Senators from Massachusetts. Please circulate this statement as well.*

Write to

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