

From Wyoming to Cape Wind: A Second Appeal to the Environmental Community to Support the Cape Wind Project

By Charles Komanoff

January, 2003

I read the Dec. 29 *NY Times* article, [Ranchers Bristle as Gas Wells Loom on the Range](#), that Tom Gray posted here, detailing the ecological and social devastation being caused by coal-bed methane development in Wyoming's Powder River Basin. It took me back to a time 25 years ago, in the mid-1970s, when the future path of energy development was up for grabs and activists mobilized to stop the fossil-nuke industry from laying waste to natural and human communities all over the U.S.

Defending the American West from ruinous energy development was a particularly intense, gut-level part of that struggle for many of us, including me. I was living in New York then but spending as much time as I could in the Northern Rockies, hiking the high country and getting out onto the land, meeting ranchers, Indians, environmentalists and fellow eco-freaks. I fished for my breakfast in Shoshone streams, played barrelhouse piano in a Montana renewable-energy road show, and got high inhaling Amory Lovins' *Soft Energy Paths* at 12,000 feet in the Wind River range.

Natural gas, or methane, occupied a middle position in the energy debate back then. Gas was a fossil fuel, hence non-renewable, but it was less polluting than coal or oil and seemed well suited for democratically scaled small engines and generators that could later switch to quasi-renewable fuels like hydrogen. Gas could be the "bridge" carrying us from our bondage in the Egypt of oil, nukes and coal to the promised land where thermodynamically correct renewable and conservation technologies could warm our houses and cool our beer without draining our pocketbooks and plundering the planet.

Conventional natural gas deposits in the Lower 48 were running out, we thought, but there was hope that unconventional sources would take up the slack. One such source, coal-bed methane, promised to be especially simple and benign; just sink a pipe and collect the gas. A few decades later, the reality revealed in the *Times* is anything but benign: the austere beautiful Powder River Basin is now laced with saline creeks and flammable rivers; the vast Wyoming silences are shattered 24-7 by screaming compressors; fifth-generation ranchers, their wells ruined, are being forced off the land and driven to violence.

The *Times* article is yet another reminder of the ongoing devastation wrought by America's overuse of fossil and nuclear fuels. Last month, I circulated an [open letter](#) in support of the Cape Wind project in Nantucket Sound. The immediate backdrop to that letter was the destruction of hundreds of miles of Spanish coast by the spilled cargo of the oil tanker *Prestige*. The Wyoming coal-bed methane horror has spurred today's letter, but there is no shortage of relevant news: record melting of the Greenland ice sheet; dwindling glaciers in the Alps, Andes and Rockies; Appalachian forests and towns obliterated by mountaintop strip-mining of coal; and of course the daily flow of oil money from U.S. motorists to al Qaeda via the House of Sa'ud.

Against this onslaught the projected output of the 170 turbines comprising the Cape Wind

project is, to be sure, a drop in the bucket: one part in 2,500 of U.S. electricity production, and one part in 7,500 of all energy consumed in the fifty states. On the other hand, 17 other proposals for off-shore wind farms totaling over 3,000 turbines have been advanced for the East Coast outer continental shelf, from Massachusetts to Virginia, according to a draft brief by the Humane Society of the United States, which opposes the Cape Wind project. In round numbers, these proposals would sum to one percent of U.S. electricity production. Add the onshore wind projects underway and proposed in California and the Great Plains, and the share multiplies. Not the 18% share that wind supplies in Denmark, far from it, in fact, but clearly getting somewhere.

“Wind clutter,” the towers and turbines are already being called. For me, this is a sourly evocative phrase. When cyclists locked their bikes to poles outside the World Trade Center, the Port Authority guys called it “bike clutter” to justify clipping the locks and taking the bikes. That was in 1990, before global warming from burning fossil fuels had manifested itself beyond any doubt, before Gulf War I (or II) had set the Middle East afire, and of course before the twin towers themselves were reduced to ashes. And before some residents of Cape Cod — among them, we may be certain, shareowners in the corporations taking the methane out from under the ranchers in the Power River Basin — rose up to stop the Cape Wind farm from “cluttering” Nantucket Sound.

Clearly, these are people with an exceptional sensitivity to “clutter.” From four miles — the closest approach of any of the Cape Wind turbines to land — the full height of a tower could be covered twice over with the width of a fingertip held at arm’s length, as I noted in my earlier letter. But regardless, the more windmills the merrier, I say. Not just to multiply the numerical displacement of fossil fuels but to make manifest the existence of an alternative — and to take the dirty secret of energy production out of the shadows of West Virginia and Wyoming and Kuwait and put it squarely in front of our picture windows.

The value of the windmills, I am arguing, goes beyond energy-share percentages to the plane of symbols and images. That is the realm where the ecological high ground has been pulled out from under us, where the masses of people have been acting out their desires — choosing the manly SUV over the prim Prius, the macho snowmobile over the effete snowshoes, the chic halogen lamp over the clunky compact-fluorescent. Perhaps the windmills, captivating and alluring, can spark a change in popular conceptions of what is desirable and help steer individual and public choices in a different direction.

I personally find the windmills magnificent, and I believe others will come to see them the same way. Whether it’s form or function I can’t say, to me the two are indivisible. The slowly rotating blades draw energy from the air and in effect put fossil fuels back in the ground where they can’t do harm. It’s a form of magic, is it not? And people want magic, they want beauty, they want tangible ways of living on Earth without destroying it. Seeing the beauty in windmills could be a turning point, making possible a wider appreciation of what are now, we should admit, a beleaguered minority’s values: trust in energy efficiency, devotion to conservation, identification with the natural world.

We need to start somewhere — the losses are becoming unbearable — and we might as well start with Cape Wind. Granted, this is quite a burden to load onto one project. But the Cape Wind project is no little matter; it is already a big issue in New England and has the

makings of a national cause célèbre. As I wrote last month, the spectacle of well-heeled environmentalists writing checks to “green groups,” while blocking a wind-energy project in their backyard, discredits not just the cause of renewable energy but the environmental movement as a whole. (A friend in Houston reports that the project is constantly brought up in polite conversations there as proof of the double standards of environmentalists.) Conversely, Nantucket Sound graced with clean, quiet windmills would begin to show the way out of our suicidal dependence on fossil fuels and toward a way of living in harmony with the natural world.

Following is a list of people and organizations that need to hear that your organization and/or you as an individual strongly support the Cape Wind project, and that you want and expect them to do the same.

Sincerely,

Charles Komanoff / kea@igc.org

Please write to:

Karen Adams
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Northeast District
696 Virginia Road
Concord, MA 01742
Email: Karen.K.Adams@usace.army.mil
(The Army Corps must permit the Cape Wind project.)

Senator Edward M. Kennedy
2400 JFK Building
Boston, MA 02203
Fax: (617) 565-3183
Email: senator@kennedy.senate.gov
and

Senator John Kerry
One Bowdoin Square, 10th Floor
Boston, MA 02114
Fax: (617) 248-3870
Email: john_kerry@kerry.senate.gov
(Both U.S. senators from Massachusetts are considered pro-environment; their support, particularly that of Kennedy, who maintains a home in Hyannis Port, will send a powerful signal.)

Douglas I. Foy
President
Conservation Law Foundation
62 Summer Street
Boston, MA 02110
Email: dfoy@clf.org

(Foy, the redoubtable long-time leader of the Conservation Law Foundation, has been named by new Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney to be Commissioner of Commonwealth Development, a new super-cabinet position overseeing environment, transportation and housing. Backing from Foy, within the constraints of his possible regulatory role, will help secure Romney's support. Please use Doug's CLF addresses while he is being installed in his governmental position.)

John Adams
Executive Director
The Natural Resources Defense Council
40 West 20th Street
New York, NY 10011
jadams@nrdc.org

(Until recently, the Web site of the anti-windmill Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound carried a statement opposing the project from NRDC senior attorney Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and noted Kennedy's NRDC affiliation, suggesting that NRDC also opposed the project. The NRDC affiliation has now been excised from Kennedy's anti-windmill statement. But NRDC itself is still tiptoeing along the sidelines, waiting for "the results of a comprehensive environmental review," according to its "Position Statement on Offshore Wind." The council's prominence and its former identification (via Kennedy) with the opponents call for a more assertive stance. I suggest something along these lines: *NRDC believes that proposals to generate commercial quantities of electricity using offshore wind turbines, such as the Cape Wind farm proposed for Nantucket Sound, will reduce the environmental impact of energy production while also demonstrating to the people of Massachusetts and the United States that alternatives to the current unsustainable fossil-nuclear system are feasible and attainable. We look forward to reviewing the EIR for the Cape Wind project, but unless significant new information comes to light we expect to support it vigorously.* Please urge Mr. Adams to state such a position.)

John Knox
Executive Director
Earth Island Institute
300 Broadway, Suite 28
San Francisco, CA 94133
johnknox@earthisland.org

(EII's International Marine Mammal Project opposes the project, so unsurprisingly the Nantucket Alliance's Web site lists EII as an opponent, although EII, like NRDC, insists that it has not taken a position. Neutrality supports the fossil-fuel status quo. Our urgings for NRDC's Adams apply equally to EII's Knox.)