

COLLISION COURSE

BY JACK E. DAVIS



omewhere beneath Gulf of Mexico waters lies the archive of Spanish West Florida. When Americans invaded Pensacola in 1818, Spanish officials fled for Cuba. Intercepted en route by pirates, they heaved the colony's records overboard.

The watery resting place is fitting. Much of the history of five U.S. states is entombed in the Gulf of Mexico. And every so often, a major event involving that extraordinary ocean basin reminds us that we are not the sole animating force in our history.

Nature is an equal, sometime greater, influence (something history books fail to teach), and from Texas to Florida, the Gulf is nature supreme.

Before the Houdini spin on disappearing oil leads us to minimize, even forget, the Deepwater Horizon tragedy, we should pause to understand that for the past 150 years our behavior has been on a collision course with the Gulf and its enriching presence. Whenever we have tried to get the upper hand on nature — believing we can rewrite its laws with the pen of scientific knowledge, engineering and technology — we have diminished the value of that presence and steered ourselves into disastrous waters.

The region's earliest inhabitants chose a wiser course, forming a relationship with the Gulf that would serve well today. They accepted nature's terms and reaped perennial benefits as a result. Vital Gulf estuaries allowed the Calusa of southwest Florida, for example, to flourish as a rare sedentary civilization of impressive size and complexity without the need of agriculture.

Yielding more than the combined fisheries of the U.S. East Coast, the Gulf's cornucopia of marine life later spawned fishing communities from the Florida Keys to southernmost Texas, the terra firma of a premier seafood industry. Tarpon off Fort Meyers lured Florida's first rod-and-reel tourists, and Gulf sponges turned Tarpon Springs into a Greek-American city.

White sugar-sand beaches, a gift of nature duplicated to the same degree nowhere else in the U.S., produced a leisure economy on Gulf shores duplicated nowhere else.

Hurricanes have made, shaped and wiped out beaches. Drawn to the Gulf's warm, shallow waters, they determined the outcome of international rivalries, the design of architecture and infrastructure and, to some extent, the location of the state capital on the red hills at Tallahassee.

Hurricanes stir little enthusiasm for accepting nature on its own terms. But we subvert nature's beneficence when we



destroy coastal wetlands that are valuable barriers against storms, and perpetuate our ignorance with the label “natural disaster” when we unwisely build in harm’s way. The 50-mile-long Houston Ship Channel is a child of the devastating 1900 Galveston hurricane. It is also parent to offshore oil drilling and onshore refining, and an example of our imprudent diversion from nature’s harmonizing course.

The future father of American environmentalism, John Muir, came to see the folly of our ways when in 1867 the Gulf beckoned him on a 1,000-mile walk from the Midwest. Contemplative time at Cedar Key instilled him with the faith that prefigured his cause: humans should regard themselves as no “more than a small part of the one great unit of creation.”

Observing the cycle of life on another Gulf island a century later, Mississippi artist Walter Anderson concluded that “nature is not wasteful” but that “man is a wasteful fool.” He saw the sharp decline of the brown pelican population at the same time that he witnessed the erection of Gulf oil rigs.

John Muir’s insight, in other words, gained little currency. Overfishing has depleted the great cornucopia. Development and commerce have wiped out countless miles of marine habitat. Raw sewage from most coastal cities has at one time or another fouled shorelines. Industrial and agricultural run-

off has created oxygen-depleted dead zones at the mouths of the Mississippi, Brazos and Fenholloway rivers.

And oil has spilled. The Gulf region has suffered six spills since 2000, and more than 27,000 abandoned oil and gas wells, dating to the 1940s, puncture the basin’s floor, their seals subject to no regulated inspections.

Some will argue that oil is another offering of the Gulf and therefore should be taken. But its extraction feeds an indulgence beyond the offering and puts other natural endowments at risk. It also means that profit-driven corporations will dictate the history of the Gulf coast, just as BP is doing now.

Nature’s patronage is a far better bargain. If we had accepted its regime rather than imposed upon it our own, our future would be secure, as had been our past, with sustainable gifts that have now been destroyed.

The Gulf will survive the latest abuse. But its enriching presence in the course of human lives will be lost if we don’t rethink our relationship with this wondrous body of water.

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