

AN INVITATION TO COASTAL ACTIVISM

By Jim Blackburn
December 27, 2000

Every year about this time I get the urge to write about the Texas coast and share it with those of you with an interest in coastal protection. This year, my interest is even greater because Michael Berryhill and I have been working for the past year on *The Book of Texas Bays* along with photographer Jim Olive. *The Book of Texas Bays* is being prepared through grants to the Galveston Bay Conservation and Preservation Association (GBCPA). We hope to have this book published in the next year or two.

The Book of Texas Bays has given me the chance to collect data and read information about the Texas coast from the marshes on the Louisiana side of Sabine Lake to the native brush ranches along the Laguna in Tamaulipas, Mexico. Working on this book has also convinced me that we on the Texas coast have an absolute gold mine in our coastal resources, one that we do not fully appreciate and do not carefully protect. The good news is that there is much of the Texas coast left to protect and there are many individuals and agencies working to purchase and set aside unique areas. The bad news is that we do not seem to have the collective will to regulate to protect the coast and to stop bad projects.

My work on this book has convinced me that we need a stronger brand of activism on the Texas coast. We have been too complacent about bad projects and bad ideas in the past. We have collectively failed to put together a strong voice for coastal protection. It should not be socially acceptable to be a proponent of coastal destruction. There should be peer pressure against bad projects. There should be consequences.

Such is not the case at the turn of the century in Texas. In this coastal update, I hope to convince you to resolve in 2001 to get up and do something **publicly** to protect the coast.

THE VALUE OF THE COASTAL BAYS AND ESTUARIES

Toxic discharges into our bays are justified on the basis that wastewater treatment is costly. Open bay spoil disposal is justified on the basis that alternative disposal concepts are too expensive. New channels are justified on the basis of the jobs that they generate and the commerce that will cross them. Wetland filling is justified on the basis that we need another shopping center or residential community.

As a practical matter, the burden of proof is on those of us who wish to protect the coastal waters to prove that a discharge to the bay or a new channel cut or a wetland fill is harmful. Even though the Clean Water Act still has a mandate for zero discharge, no serious effort is made today by governmental agencies to require zero discharge of

wastewater from industrial sources or to stop filling of wetlands or bay disposal. There is simply a presumption that commercial interests prevail over protection interests.

I have often wondered how we, as a community, allowed our dune system to be destroyed on many of our barrier islands. I grew up in the Rio Grande Valley and I can remember very well the beautiful dune system that existed on South Padre Island. I can also remember when the bulldozers cleared out the dunes to construct a motel near the bridge crossing. These were dunes where we used to picnic and build bonfires. They were good. These dunes, however, offered more than an aesthetic benefit. They were a line of protection against the rising storm tides. If the Corps of Engineers had constructed these dunes as a sea wall, we would never have destroyed them. Yet, because they were a “gift”, we did not value them. Common sense should argue for the protection of these dunes as a “gift”. But perhaps the economic value of these dunes, if translated into the constructed cost of sea walls, is a more important concept for preservation than is either knowledge of function or aesthetic value. That just may be the reality in Texas.

Perhaps it is time to offer a different view of the coast in an attempt to expand the argument against toxic discharges as well as unwise spoil disposal, channel construction and other “dumb growth” projects on the coast. Given that money is so important in the mindset of Texas leaders, perhaps we should attempt to place a monetary value on the Texas coast and place the burden on others to demonstrate that they will not be harming these values if they wish to discharge or channelize or dump spoil.

It is important to recognize that there is much about our coastal bays and estuaries that is not common knowledge among coastal residents. While we all probably recognize that marshes and swamps take carbon dioxide from the air and make it into organic matter, did you know that the our coastal estuary systems are among the most productive ecosystems on the Earth in terms of taking carbon and making organic matter? They rank beside tropical rain forests in terms of the amount of primary productivity – the amount of carbon dioxide taken from the atmosphere and converted into plant matter.

This primary productivity is extremely important if you love the coast. Many of us enjoy fishing for redfish and speckled trout and we all know that they feed upon shrimp and mullet and crabs. But what do the shrimp and mullet feed upon? What do the juvenile trout and redfish and larval crabs eat? In fact, they all depend upon the diatoms and other phytoplankton that grow in our bays, just like a crop of corn.

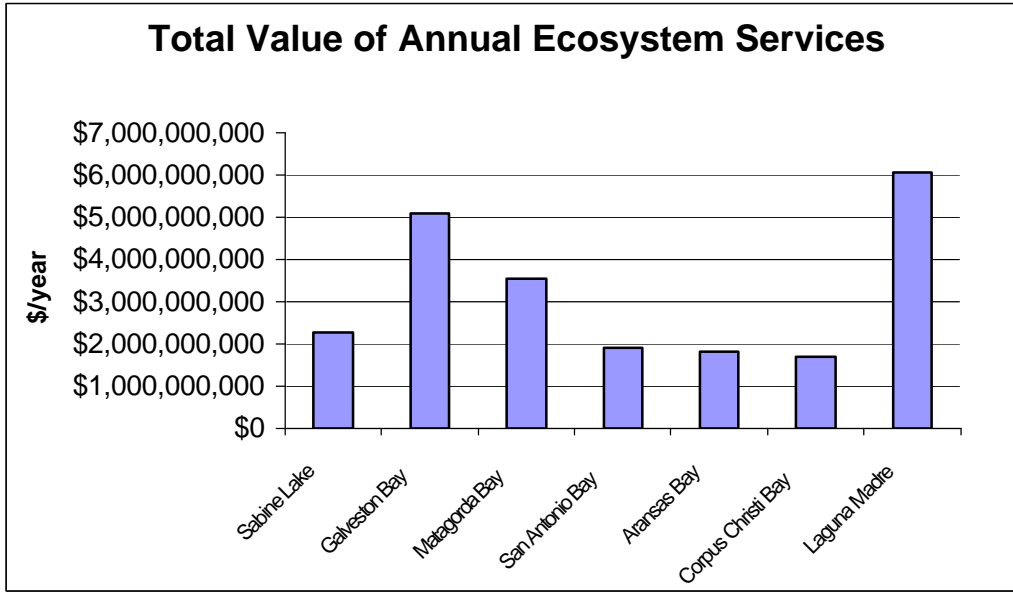
It is a common practice to establish a value per acre for farmland. That value is a function of the type of soil, the importance of the crops that are grown in a particular region, the availability of irrigation water and other variables. We, as a capitalist society, understand the valuation of private farmland to some extent. However, we, as a capitalist society, do not understand valuation of “goods” such as estuaries that are not bought and sold in a classic sense and that perform functions that are for the common good. That value is outside the market system and essentially without valuation in our system.

For years, economists have been arguing that we need to reconsider valuation techniques, particularly in public projects and in permit decisions. Books such as *For the Common Good* by Daly and Cobb, *Valuing the Earth* by Daly and Townsend and even *Industrial Ecology* by Graedel and Allenby all put forward the proposition that current economic methods are failing to fully and fairly reflect the “full cost” of goods and services. To address this deficiency to some extent, an economist named Robert Costanza has developed a way of calculating the economic value of certain ecological systems and has published this methodology in the prestigious, peer-reviewed journal *Nature*.

Under Dr. Costanza’s methodology, dollar values were assigned to various ecosystems on the basis of the services that they provide to society, including recycling of nutrients, food production and waste treatment, as well as other functions. These values ranged from a high of over \$10,000 per acre per year for estuaries to a low of less than \$100 per acre per year in the open ocean. The highest values were for estuaries, seagrass and algal beds and swamps and floodplains. A tropical rainforest came in at about \$1000 an acre per year, far less than the over \$4000 an acre per year for coastal marshes.

According to Dr. Costanza, these numbers are very conservative. They should, however, provide a baseline for understanding the value that we have in our coastal bays and marshes.

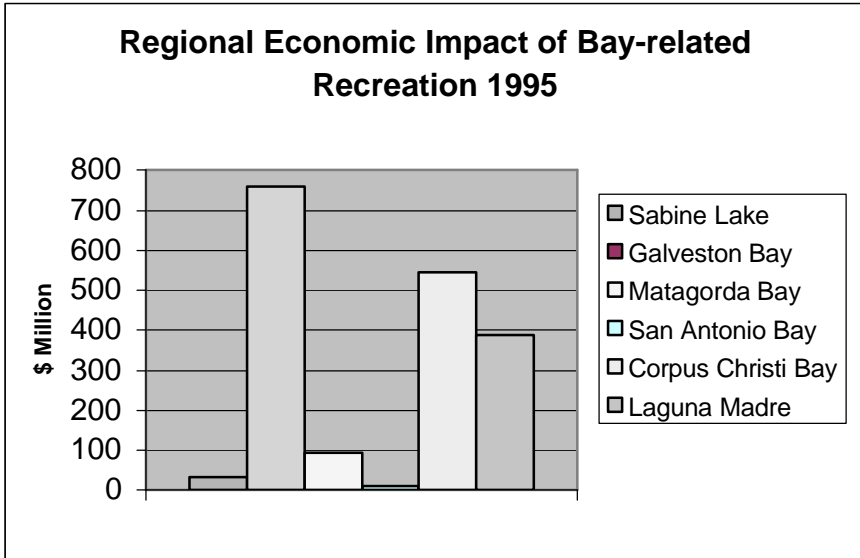
As part of the work on *The Book of Texas Bays*, Chris Johnson and I attempted to establish the value for each of the bay systems of the Texas coast. In order to establish this value, we first had to determine the number of acres of estuary, algal flats, marshes, swamps and seagrass beds for each coastal bay system. We then multiplied these acreages times the dollar values per acre per year that Dr. Costanza had established in his published work. As can be seen in the figure below, the values are staggering. Over \$22 billion per year in services are generated by the coastal bay systems. The greatest values are generated by the Laguna Madre and Galveston Bay, followed closely by Matagorda Bay. Sabine Lake came in fourth, primarily on the strength of the associated swamp and marsh systems. The smaller systems such as San Antonio Bay, Aransas Bay and Corpus Christi Bay reflected the lowest values, which are still almost two billion dollars per bay system per year in value.



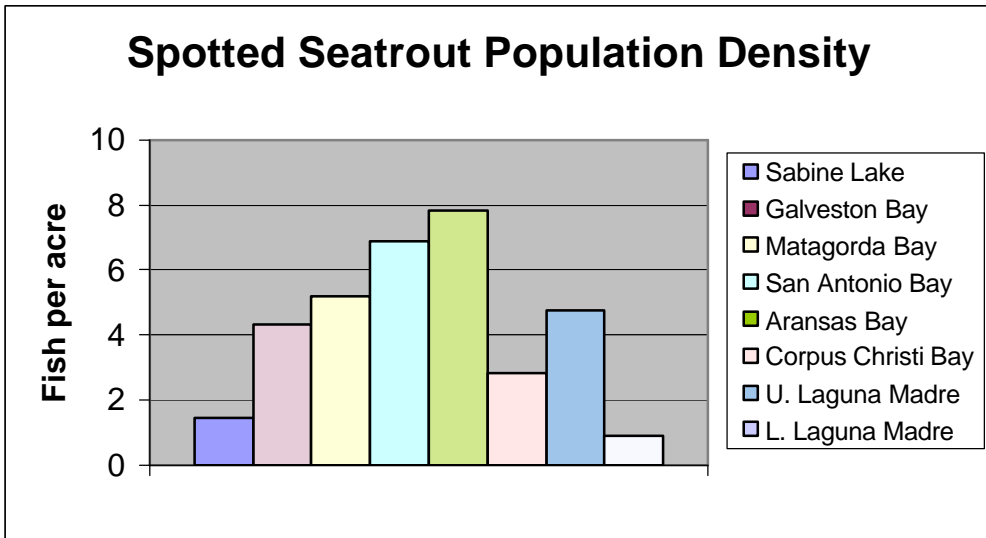
These values are taken for granted by Texas coastal residents and the State of Texas. They are “gifts” that are “free goods”. Unfortunately, we Texas residents allow these values to be taken from us without good – or sometimes any - justification.

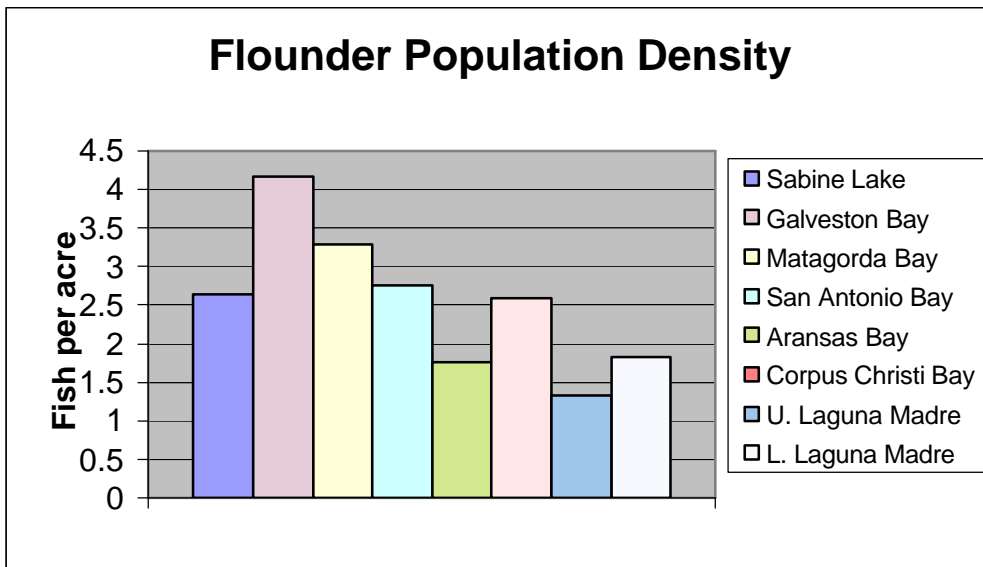
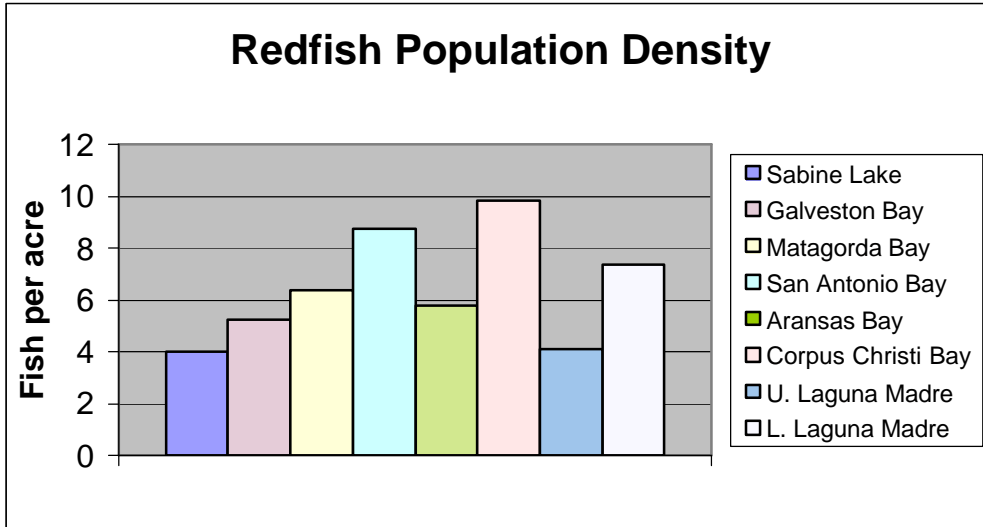
No wastewater permit should be allowed for toxic discharges into coastal waters without a requirement to reduce to the greatest extent possible the discharge of toxics. No open bay disposal should be allowed that takes some percentage of an estuary and converts it to another use without a full understanding of why a better alternative method of disposal could not be pursued. No water development project that deprives coastal waters of freshwater inflow should be allowed without a thorough understanding of the “full cost” of the project, including harm to the natural system. No new channel should be constructed without a full understanding of the harm versus the benefits and why such construction could not and should not occur elsewhere.

Dr. Costanza’s approach is not the only way to look at the Texas coast. In fact, he has agreed that site specific data, such as that concerning recreation, should be added to his values. As many of you are certainly aware, the Texas coast is an excellent recreational venue. Bay recreation generates over \$1.5 billion in cash flow annually along the coast and is responsible for over 32,000 jobs. The recreational usage of the various bays breaks down as follows:

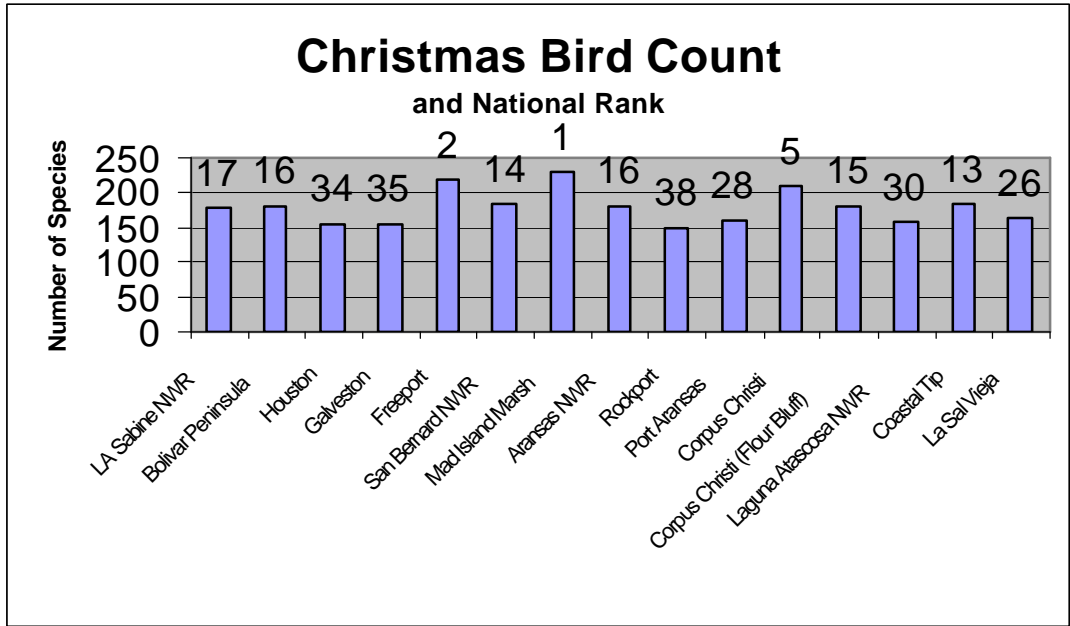


Interestingly, the recreational fishing usage does not necessarily reflect the density of the fish. Which bay system do you believe is the best for Speckled Trout? Flounder? Redfish? Take a look at the following statistics and match this with your experience.





Yet, fishing is not the whole story. In fact, coastal bird-watching may be the most important recreational asset of the Texas coast and we have not even begun to realize the economic value associated with this sport. The Texas coast is a pathway from northern nesting sites to southern wintering sites and is also a destination. The migration of songbirds in the spring is amazing as is the fall hawk migration. The strength of the Texas coast from a bird-watching standpoint is illustrated by the following chart showing the number of species seen on the various Christmas bird counts and the relative rank of these bird counts in comparison to other United States counts.



It is truly amazing that the Texas coast would have 15 Christmas counts in the Top 40 and 3 of the top 5 nationally. It is the combination of ecosystems that leads to these high numbers, the co-existence of open water, barrier island, estuary, oyster reefs, marshes and swamps, riverine floodplains, cropland and prairie, that brings the diversity of birds. From an economic standpoint, this natural “gift” has yet to be understood or correctly used.

I am hoping for the day when we do not have to make economic arguments to justify coastal preservation. Our coastal ecosystem has value far beyond dollars. The ability to go out and catch a flounder or a speck or a red is beyond value to me. But perhaps the work of Dr. Costanza and others will help all Texans find their way to justifying tighter discharge standards, better methods of spoil disposal and “smart growth” that leads us to better conceived projects and the selection of least damaging alternative project sites and project design. That is a reasonable New Year’s wish for 2001.

THE ULTIMATE DUMB GROWTH PROJECT - DUMBPORT

There is a current movement in the United States called “smart growth”, an excellent concept that attempts to integrate environmental protection and economic development. “Smart growth” honestly considers alternatives and attempts to find the right location for a particular development, given its environmental and social impacts. “Dumb growth” is blind to impacts and alternatives and is fueled by power and aggression.

Unfortunately, what we have in Texas today is more often “dumb growth” than “smart growth”. My case in point is the Port of Houston’s proposed Bayport container project. I hereby nominate the proposed Bayport container port as the “dumb growth” project of the early 21st century and christen it “Dumbport”.

The Bayport industrial complex – the home of Dumbport – is a “planned industrial complex” designed by Exxon and its real estate development company Friendswood Development Company. When Bayport was platted in the 1960s, deed restrictions were executed to protect adjacent residential areas such as Seabrook, LaPorte, Shoreacres and El Jardin. The existing residential areas were to be protected from noise, air pollution, lighting and all industrial development was originally proposed to be west of Highway 146. The deepwater channel was designed only to serve the industries within the complex.

Today, the Port of Houston is proposing to develop almost 1000 acres of land east of 146 for a huge container port. This port will generate excessive amounts of noise and air pollution and will light the night sky. Over 5000 trucks a day will come and go from this site and will jam into 146, Red Bluff, 225 and Fairmont Parkway. If developed, this port project will destroy residential areas within a mile and will cause the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in property value.

Peter Brown, an acknowledged land use expert, has studied the impact of this proposed port project and believes that it will effectively end the residential usage of the upper west side of Galveston Bay. Peter’s opinion is that this residential area will effectively be destroyed by the combined effects of traffic, noise, air pollution and lighting. Over time, Peter believes that commercial and industrial uses will squeeze out this damaged residential development and ultimately replace them. In this manner, the character of upper Galveston Bay will change forever.

This loss of residential development will have huge implications for Galveston Bay. Rather than grassy slopes and piers, we will have concrete and pollution. An eclectic and charming area will become another industrial and commercial zone.

This container port will also require Galveston Bay to be channelized to 50 feet of depth in the Houston and Bayport Ship Channels. Although the Port of Houston denies it plans to dredge a 50-foot channel, the facts argue otherwise. The shipping industry

standard for container ports is now 50 feet of depth. The docks at the Port's Bayport site are designed

to a depth of 50 feet. The turning basin is designed for 50 feet of depth. It seems clear that a 50-foot channel will follow.

Coastal activists have long fought a 50-foot channel deep into Galveston Bay. A deeper channel will bring more salt water into upper Galveston Bay, increasing salinity and affecting bay organism use patterns. At a time when freshwater inflows are being reduced, we should not be allowing deeper channels to bring more salt further into our bays.

Taken together, the impacts of this port project at Bayport are severe. Traffic will be snarled by trucks and trains, residential uses will be displaced and a deeper channel will be dug into the bay. Yet, it is not these impacts alone that make this project an example of "dumb growth" – it is the fact that an excellent alternative exists that will avoid these problems and allow the container industry to flourish.

The alternative site to Bayport is found in Texas City. There is a spoil island called Shoal Point behind the Texas City industrial complex. This site is removed from residential areas and will not impact people's homes. This site is on the Texas City Ship Channel, which has been approved for a 50-foot channel project. The bay can handle the salinity here near its outlet into the Gulf. It is the upper bay that must be protected from a salinity increase.

Mayor Chuck Doyle of Texas City started work on this site several years ago. He met with me and other coastal activists to hear out our concerns. He changed the alignment of the access road to avoid problems with marsh and bird impacts. He addressed our concerns.

Mayor Doyle went to the Port of Houston and asked them to build their container port at Shoal Point. He offered them the site for \$1 per year. They turned him down, saying the site was too expensive to develop and too far for trucks to drive.

Undaunted, Mayor Doyle put together a deal with Stevedoring Services of America (SSA) and Americana Shipping to develop Shoal Point. These companies are putting up over \$500 million in private capital to build a container port at Texas City. When completed, this port could take over 30% of the container business from the Port of Houston.

At this time, permit applications for the Port of Houston's Bayport proposal and Texas City's Shoal Point site are both pending before the Corps of Engineers, Galveston District. Environmental impact statements (EISs) are now being prepared for each project. At the initial hearing on the Bayport site, over 2500 people showed up, with most of those people being opposed to the project. At the initial hearing on the Shoal Point site, 13 people spoke with none being opposed to the development.

So, in the early 21st century, we are faced with competing port proposals. Both will generate jobs and growth in the Houston-Galveston region. One will destroy residential areas, snarl traffic, cause a 50-foot channel in upper Galveston Bay, worsen our worst air quality area and cost taxpayers \$1.2 billion. The other – Shoal Point in Texas City – is designed to reduce environmental harm at a location compatible with a 50-foot channel. Shoal Point will be built with \$500 million in private capital and will not hurt residential development areas.

Duh – which one do you think is the better deal?

CONCLUSION

So, this is where we are on the Texas coast – “dumb growth or smart growth – “dumbport” or “smartport”. Are we going to continue to allow our governmental entities such as the Port of Houston Authority to do whatever they wish when better alternatives exist? Are we going to stand silently by as poor decision after poor decision threatens our bays and shorelines?

I urge each of you to stand up and be counted on this and other issues. Let your leaders and elected officials know what you think. Tell others. It should not be socially acceptable to put forth a “dumb growth” project such as “dumbport”. We deserve better.

In many respects, our situation is analogous to someone who stays in an abusive relationship. We believe that there is no other way to live. We are embarrassed to complain because there are benefits from this relationship. Yet, we and those who come after us lose in the end. It is a poor trade-off.

The alternative is to stand up and oppose “dumb growth” such as “dumbport”. My goal is that in 2001 we will have the largest environmental demonstration ever on the Texas coast when we publicly state our opposition to the Bayport container proposal by the Port of Houston Authority. We hope to have 25,000 to 50,000 people show up and oppose this boondoggle. The timing of our opposition will be keyed to the release of the Draft EIS by the Corps of Engineers. So, let me hear from you if you want to participate. We’ll put you on the list.

So, get up off your rear and repeat after me – “I will fight publicly for the coast in 2001”. If we all speak up publicly, if we all contact our elected representatives and senators and county and city officials, we can stop any dumb project. Just say no to Dumbport and join me on the streets of Houston this summer.

For more information on Dumbport, contact Galveston Bay Conservation and Preservation Association, GBCPA at (713) 840-2729 or write to P.O. Box 323, Seabrook, Texas 77586. You can also visit the website at www.gbcpa.org.

To become active in the protection of Matagorda Bay, contact the Matagorda Bay Foundation at (713) 526-7417 or write at P.O. Box 13028 Houston, Texas 77219. To become active in saving the Lower Laguna Madre, contact the Lower Laguna Foundation P.O. Box 153, Pt. Mansfield, Texas 78598.

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