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# Castles in the Sand

By ROBERT S. YOUNG and ORRIN H. PILKEY

AT this year's meeting of the Geological Society of America, which took place in Philadelphia in October, representatives of the United States Army Corps of Engineers presented proposals to re-engineer the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Some 200 coastal and marine scientists attended the meeting; most of them were stunned by the scope, expense and sheer wastefulness of the projects the corps is considering.

The corps' proposals include a large seawall to protect parts of Bay St. Louis on the coast along with storm surge gates, similar to those that the British use on the Thames, to close off local bays. One particularly awe-inspiring proposal calls for reconfiguring the Mississippi Gulf Islands to approximate their circa 1969, pre-Hurricane Camille length and width, while adding sufficient sand to the islands to achieve elevations of roughly 20 feet. These barrier islands are part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore and include designated wilderness areas. The proposed project would dump an estimated 50 million cubic yards of sand on the national seashore solely to protect redevelopment of the mainland coast.

At the very least, these proposals would cost billions of dollars to realize, aside from the environmental damage that would ensue. Yet as the corps acknowledged at the Geological Society meeting, its proposed "coastal improvements" would not provide protection from the kind of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes that have destroyed coastal Mississippi twice in the past 37 years. So what, exactly, is the point?

The corps' failure to devise a rational redevelopment plan points to the futility of trying to maintain coastal development in such an unstable place. A realistic appraisal would conclude that the long-term outlook for coastal development there is bleak. Yet the corps, urged on by developers, seems determined to wage a quixotic fight.

This is particularly galling in light of a recent report issued by the British government under the leadership of Sir Nicholas Stern, who is widely viewed as a pragmatist. The Stern report concluded that it will probably cost global economies more to ignore climate change than to take steps to address it. It seems we are about to learn this lesson in coastal Mississippi. Rather than use a creative, flexible approach to redevelopment on a vulnerable, changing coast, the corps is commanding nature to behave itself.

The clear consensus among coastal scientists at the Geological Society meeting was that the corps' ambitious plans for Mississippi will fail — either all at once in a major hurricane or gradually through shoreline erosion and other long-term changes. It is an effort in futility.

Pragmatism, fiscal and otherwise, dictates that we cannot afford to continue the cycle of development and destruction. The vulnerability of our nation's shores will only increase over the next decades as global climate change leads to rising sea levels, increased coastal erosion and stronger hurricanes of greater duration.

The time has come to step back from this extraordinarily hazardous shoreline, perhaps to replace the blocks of destroyed buildings with rows of protective dunes in a seashore park. We should not rebuild on the shoreline of vulnerable areas like the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We certainly shouldn't be doing it with federal dollars or destroying a National Seashore in order to provide a false sense of security for redevelopment.

If the corps follows through on its proposals, the United States will once again miss an opportunity to respond sensibly to the threat of global warming.

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