

Monkeying with the coast

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Pop quiz: When do politicians quote scientists? When the scientists agree with the politicians, of course.

So, when local and state officials are lobbying Congress or the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for this or that coastal-restoration project or storm-protection plan, they are careful to say why the scientists believe it is necessary.

The rest of the time, scientists are rejected as mere inconveniences, what with their facts and figures, proofs and studies.

You don't solve a problem by studying it. You solve it by attacking it.

Or so the politicians would have us believe.

Sure, attacking the problem is part of solving it. But before any successful, coordinated effort can be made to solve any problem, that problem must be thoroughly understood. That, my friends, often takes some studying.

Like it or not, sometimes our politicians lack the basic knowledge required to attack a problem, no matter how determined they might be to do so or to be seen as doing so.

That brings us to the matter of the sand berms that Gov. Jindal is so determined to put up across the Louisiana coast.

Why?

Well, there isn't any good reason aside from the fact that Jindal wants to be seen doing something, anything to protect the coast.

You can imagine the thinking in the governor's office: The oil is coming. Quick, put up rocks and berms. That will work. It has to work. It's better than doing nothing.

You know what might be even better than that? Listening to the people who know about science. That way, whatever you do has a higher probability of success.

Considering the methods that will work the best might make it a bit more time-consuming to come up with a plan, but the resulting plan will be more solid than something hurriedly scraped together by politicians and opposed by the people who know their science.

Here is the way one scientist put it in a Courier and Daily Comet story this week: “The thing about monkeying around like this is that there are unintended consequences. What we do know for sure is that projects like this will change wave patterns, they’ll change the way the sand and the sediment moves, and there will be negative impacts.” Those were the words of Rob Young, director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University.

I like the way he characterized our politicians’ plan as “monkeying around.”

I might not ever come up with a serious plan for anything, much less protecting a huge chunk of coast and barrier islands from an onslaught of oil. But if I ever do create a plan dealing with the interaction of water and soil and a professor of geosciences calls it “monkeying around,” I hope I have the good sense to second guess myself.

No such luck here.

Here, the politicians accuse the scientists of coming to inconvenient conclusions.

“Please tell me what they want to use other than rocks or sand. (The scientists) tell you everything they think you’re doing wrong, but they don’t solve the problem,” said state Rep. Gordon Dove, R-Houma.

Perhaps the scientists have not solved the problem, but a good start might be listening to them rather than simply dismissing what seem to be legitimate concerns as pointless obstructionism.

For years, politicians have touted scientific evidence of all sorts of coastal maladies, mainly because that evidence strengthened their case for storm protection and coastal restoration.

These scientists still know what is likely to happen when human beings start disrupting natural patterns. The fact that their arguments now run counter to the hasty plans of politicians is no reason to ignore them.

In fact, given a choice between self-serving politicians and people with scientific knowledge, I will always choose the latter for deciding how to protect our coast.

The scientists don’t have some sinister ulterior motive.

They don’t want oil washed ashore any more than our politicians do. But when politicians trot out a plan that doesn’t fly with the experts, the experts owe it to themselves and to us to speak out against it.

And when those public officials are monkeying around with our fragile coast, we need the warning.