

Wind Power on the Horizon; Why Do People Care?

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Problem Statement

The east coast of the United States is densely populated, is dependent primarily upon coal and natural gas for its supply of electricity, and has offshore wind resources sufficient to displace a significant portion of its fossil fueled generation. Were this to become reality the number of wind towers needed would be in the tens of thousands. A private developer has proposed erecting 130 wind turbines in the waters of Nantucket Sound off the south shore of Cape Cod, Massachusetts; and we've seen that even a project of this comparatively modest scale has engendered ardent public opposition. From the perspective of society wind is, in comparison to fossil fuel, an extremely benign means of generating electricity; which means that as concern for issues such as climate change and mercury pollution grows the pressure to develop alternative energy sources, such as wind, will also escalate.

Research objectives

This is a new use for US oceans and current policies provide no guidance for its development. This research is intended to explore and document the nature of the beliefs and values behind the debate over development of offshore wind power in the USA

Tools and techniques

The data collection method will be to conduct a total of 30 or more in-depth, semi-structured interviews with selected proponents and opponents, along with a random sampling of local citizens. The process involves elicitation of the subject's thoughts, feelings, values, and beliefs through guiding open-ended queries. The interview places priority on the inclination of the subject, so question order varies somewhat across interviews; which are usually recorded and transcribed for analysis. Connections to quantitative methods of analysis can often be achieved by later collection of quantitative survey data and analysis.

Proposed Research

A preliminary qualitative study of the public debate about the Cape Cod development has been conducted; (Kempton, 2005) and follow-up efforts at quantitative data collection is currently underway. The Nantucket Sound project is the most concrete attempt to realize

offshore wind's potential in the United States, but, there are two other locations where events have brought the issue of offshore wind into public awareness.

In New York, the Long Island Power Authority, a public utility, has requested proposals from developers for construction of a wind farm off the south shore of Long Island. This contrasts with Nantucket in that it is driven by a public utility as opposed to being a private initiative. Literature on public opposition to facilities siting shows that it often involves mistrust of developers so this offers an excellent opportunity for a contrasting case study.

In December of '04, the acting Governor of New Jersey imposed a 15 month moratorium on development of offshore wind facilities in NJ state waters and a Senator in that state's legislature introduced legislation calling for a 7 year moratorium on development. That bill is pending. These actions have generated considerable local press coverage and one can presume some degree of public interest and its direct relationship to prophylactic policy efforts make it also an inviting target for exploration of the values and beliefs that are related to the offshore wind issue and how the debate might influence public policy. The New York and New Jersey interviews will be guided by the results of the work done earlier in Nantucket. Analysis of the data collected there revealed several areas meriting further exploration. For example, much of the public debate short cuts understanding by assigning pejorative labels such as NIMBY. The labeling obscured a rich assortment of reasoning resulting from diverse systems of values and beliefs. Another area of interest revealed was the depth of feeling experienced by some who considered the ocean to be a special place where human intrusion was undesirable. The proposed research will be informed by the earlier Nantucket interviews, for example, fleshing out such relatively vague concepts as "the ocean as a special place;" and also will look for unique characteristics of the New York and New Jersey cases. This study will go beyond the Nantucket one in making a contrast among three sites with apparently different outcomes (strong opposition in Nantucket; minimal opposition in New York, and opposition leading to a state moratorium in New Jersey).

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