



Cape Fear Firebird

The Light of Save the Cape

September 25, 2015

*Like a circle in a spiral, like a wheel within a wheel
Never ending or beginning on an ever spinning reel
As the images unwind, like the circles that you find
In the windmills of your mind!*

~ Legrand/Bergman

A Primrose Path

The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) of the US Department of Interior recently announced completion of an environmental assessment, finding that “there would be no significant environmental or socioeconomic impacts from issuing wind energy leases within three Wind Energy Areas (WEAs) offshore North Carolina.” Two of those WEAs, very large areas for arrays of windmills 600 feet high, are off the coast of Brunswick County: Oak Island and Bald Head Island.

Does that mean that BOEM has completed a thorough environmental review of wind farms at those places? No it does not. BOEM’s “environmental assessment,” permitting moving ahead with leases for wind farms off our coast, did not assess the wind energy projects at all—not the forests of 600-foot high windmills off our beaches, not cables across our beaches to shore facilities of unknown proportions, not the potential for kills of shore birds and migratory species, not the stupendous capital cost that makes offshore wind energy the most expensive form of energy generation at hand.

The approval process has two steps: first BOEM issues leases to prospective developers of the wind farms so they can conduct site assessments. After that, should they decide to go forward, there would be another environmental review for the actual wind farms. The site assessment activities are relatively benign: a single skinny meteorological tower, some buoys, a few survey vessels. The environmental assessment of which BOEM speaks in its release is limited to those activities, the first step. But this permits issue of leases. Commitment. Commitment by a lessee, commitment by BOEM, commitment to a result that has not been defined or examined to any extent when the process begins. A commitment effectively binding on the people of North Carolina. The momentum the process acquires at this early stage will increase as money is spent and the project, whatever it is, becomes unstoppable. Yes, for actual construction, there is a second, more comprehensive environmental review. But at that late stage in the process, that’s just checking a procedural box.

The large national environmental groups, Oceana, Sierra Club, don’t care. They are in love with the concept. The windmills of their minds spin with delight. Audubon has been distressingly quiet, going along with the euphoria, reluctant to raise its voice in defense of our beloved birds.

However, the Brunswick beach communities are not so entranced. They ask what a horizon full of 600-foot towers will do to the ocean vistas on which their economies depend. They ask about cost. They ask about bird kills in the flyways for migratory birds. So do we.