

East Coast Maps to Alert Industry to Ecology Conflict

By mid-summer, any company planning to build a new oil refinery or other potentially controversial facility along the East Coast may have a better chance than before of choosing an environmentally acceptable site and avoiding fierce and prolonged legal and political battles.

The Office of Coastal Zone Management, a part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), is preparing a coastal atlas and report for the Atlantic seaboard from the Canadian border to the Florida Keys. In these documents, areas of special environmental concern, such as prime oyster beds and major nursery or feeding grounds for finfish, will be identified and rated according to their importance and sensitivity.

Also, the dozen or so major areas into which the coast will be divided—the Chesapeake and Delaware bays, Long Island Sound, and the New York Bight are examples—will be ranked as to their relative suitability, in environmental terms, for energy or industrial development. The rankings will be based on existing levels of pollution and the presence of commercially or esthetically valuable fish and wildlife species and critical natural habitats.

To be made up of more than 100 5-foot-long maps, the atlas will be a unique document. Each map will cover the entire Atlantic coast and contain information about a particular biological resource, economic activity, or environmental condition. It will be possible to put together overlays of various maps showing, for instance, concentrations of petrochemical plants, shipping lanes, and critical fish and wildlife habitats. The hope is that, from these overlays, better strategies for the siting of industrial facilities may become apparent, thus reducing the possibility of environmental and resource conflicts.

In addition to the coastal mapping program at NOAA, a complementary effort is under way at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior. Collectively, the 33 maps being prepared by this agency will cover all of the East Coast and show fish and wildlife resources and habitats. The maps will be divided into narrow horizontal bands 10,000 meters wide; each band will be identified as an area of high, low, or medium ecological sensitivity. Prepared to a much larger scale than those in the NOAA atlas, the Fish and Wildlife Service maps may prove more useful in assessing the suitability of particular industrial sites in a given region.

The two agencies' coastal mapping programs are products of the long-drawn-out and still unresolved controversy over plans to build a major oil refinery at Portsmouth, Virginia, off Hampton Roads in the lower Chesapeake Bay. Last year, these agencies, together with the Environmental Protection Agency, recommended that the Secretary of the



Photo by L. J. Carter

Brown pelican, an endangered species, fishing on tidal river behind South Carolina's Kiawah Island.

Army deny the construction permit for the project, which they opposed principally on the grounds that oil spills might endanger seed oyster beds vital to the Chesapeake Bay's \$50-million-a-year oyster industry.

Although all state and federal permits have now been issued, the future of the project—on which some \$6 million or more has been spent since it was first proposed by the Hampton Roads Energy Company 5 years ago—is still in doubt. A suit by a local citizens group is already pending in federal court, and the filing of two others is imminent. One of the latter will be brought by the National Wildlife Federation and the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund in the belief that the case is important to the reform of energy facility siting.

Encouraged by the Council on Environmental Quality, the mapping projects were undertaken by NOAA and the Fish and Wildlife Service with a view to helping companies avoid areas of high environmental sensitivity in their selection of sites for refineries and other facilities. Under Secretary of the Interior James Joseph says, "We see this as a way to get out in front and provide some guidance instead of passively waiting until after industry's large investment in a site has begun." —LUTHER J. CARTER