

Connect Savannah

# Environmental Protection + Responsible Stewardship = Strong Economy

20 years of connecting the dots with the Center for A Sustainable Coast

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The natural beauty of the Georgia coastline is undeniable: The golden glow of the spartina grass, the egret rookeries tucked in the marsh, the shimmering ribbons of water bringing the tide in and out from the sea.

The sandy beaches and maritime forests also yield a living for many, from the fishing boat captains to the fresh shrimp vendors to the tour guides and hoteliers who host visitors from around the world.

Yet this idyllic setting and its resources are under constant threat: Toxic spills from factories built on riverbanks, erosion from storm damage, development of previously pristine tracts of land, the expansion of nuclear and liquid natural gas plants and other projects lauded as economic drivers jeopardize the surrounding ecosystems as well as the existing jobs that depend on the fragile balance of the environment.

Since he helped found A Center for A Sustainable Coast in 1997, David Kyler has taken on those issues and more. Advocating through education, policy work and lawsuits when necessary, Kyler has called for sensible environmental regulation—and their enforcement by government agencies—with the rational argument that it is simply what makes the most economic sense.

Neglecting nature threatens American prosperity, he has reasoned thoughtfully on the editorial pages of every newspaper from Savannah to St. Mary's, and the only path to a strong economic future is to protect the environment.

From its small office on St. Simons Island, the scope of the Center's efforts extend around the state and in recent times have included pushing back the Palmetto Pipeline, poking holes in Georgia Power's Plant Vogtle rationale and joining other organizations in efforts to stop offshore drilling in the Atlantic, prevent coal ash dumping in Wayne County and save Cumberland Island.



All along, Kyler has continued to remind of the biggest threat to the Georgia coast and its economy: Rising sea levels due to climate change. Shifting the country's focus from fossil fuels to clean energy sources is the primary action to combat a warming planet, the inconvenient truth underlying every other battle to protect the water, land and wildlife around us.

It's a topic that will be on the table at Center for a Sustainable Coast's 20th anniversary conference, this Saturday, June 17 at the Desoto Hilton. Acclaimed environmental economist Geoffrey Heal of Columbia University will deliver the keynote address as supporters celebrate two decades of

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dogged protection of the Georgia coast and strategize for an increasingly uncertain future.

We spoke to Kyler the day after President Trump announced the United States was withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement, a decision the rest of the world warns is on the wrong side of history—and economic prosperity.

*Well, the connection between the environment and the economy is certainly a hot topic right now, but the how did the Center for A Sustainable Coast come about when it wasn't necessarily on everybody's mind?*

Well, around that time there was a group of citizens concerned that there was not enough scrutiny on environmental justice issues, especially poor communities that were being polluted and weren't being represented. The establishment of our group was closely tied to the Sapelo Foundation's interest in funding a start-up grant to that address that.

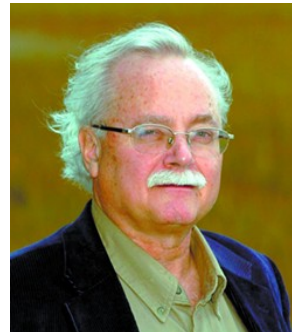
I had been serving for 20 years as a regional planner for the Coastal Regional Development Center in Brunswick, and I guess my outspoken positions on challenging the decision makers were seen as valuable. What was most prominent in my thinking, which I think impressed those who were funding us, was my emphasis on how much our practices in neglecting the environments was hurting us economically in other ways.

Of course that's a continuing theme today, but from the very beginning we drew the ties between the environment and our economy and how many times decisions made in the intent to advance economic interests actually harmed other economic interests because the environmental impacts weren't adequately assessed.

*Such as?*

Well, if a development wants to privatize the water supply and withdraw from the Altamaha River going into the marsh, that's going to affect the shellfish nurseries. That in turn adversely affects the fisheries economy and the regional nature-based tourism economy that back then we estimated to be about \$1.6 billion a year—now it's at least two billion, employing around 40,000 jobs directly and indirectly.

So it doesn't make any sense to damage those jobs to create new jobs, not to mention how the environment affects our property values and quality of life. It's contrary to the public interest.



Center for a Sustainable Coast Executive Director David Kyler

*What are CFSC's most important accomplishments of the last two decades?*

Most important—apart from demonstrating how one thing affects another in environmental functions and why ignoring them causes problems for all of us—is our collaborative work. We helped start the Altamaha and Satilla Riverkeepers and served on those boards. We've also worked closely with the Georgia Water Coalition and the Coastal Sierra Club in Savannah, as well as the Coastal Advisory Council.

Also the legal work we've been part of with the Southern Environmental Law Center and Greenlaw is important, because it at least held back or delayed a lot of bad things. But that's a two-way street, because there have been demoralizing

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judgments under the dubious politics of Georgia's legal system.

To me, it's important that the public understands that despite our best intentions, the court subverts and takes steps backwards against the public interest. An example that is most astounding is when corrective actions failed on consent orders tied to the Ogeechee fishkill incident and also in the Altamaha contamination by the Rayonier plant.

We took legal action against the EPD over a seawall built into the marsh buffer on Sea Island for its failure to enforce the terms of a consent order, and we were told by the court—it ultimately went to appeals court—that consent orders are private and there was little justification for non-profits or third parties to claim any basis for challenging them. That logic seems extremely off-base because public resources are in jeopardy. It also portended that we would have difficulty challenging future cases in the public interest.

When a permit holder is in violation of the law, they're given a chance to correct it through a private contract with the EPD [known as a 'consent order']. We have found in several instances that EPD does not construct those contracts very well to make them enforceable, nor does it do a good job of following up. So people continue to violate.

***You've calling out the big economic power players of the state. Has there been legal pushback for your efforts?***

Well, we've never been countersued. But we've never gotten grants from any of those major players either *[laughs]*.

But in 2014, I convinced the Coastal Advisory Council to write a letter to the Georgia Dept of Natural Resources protesting the EPD director's rollback of the marsh buffer. After Governor Deal

was reelected that fall, his DNR commissioner failed to reappoint me on the Coastal Advisory Council, which I had been serving on since 2002. So that was clearly a reprimand.

***There are so many economic drivers impacting the Georgia coast and its waterways—we've got the proposed spaceport near Cumberland Island, the Elba Island LNG expansion, the Savannah Harbor dredging, the turpentine plant being built on Ebenezer Creek, offshore drilling—it goes on and on. What's the most important thing to focus on?***

To be blunt, while all of these issues are extremely important and I don't want to marginalize them, they may essentially be rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic if we don't address sea level rise. Climate-change is the highest priority, especially as it relates to shore protection.

Sea level rise and storm-induced damage are immediate issues for coastal residents, as evidenced by Hurricane Matthew last fall. And there will be increasing costs to taxpayers who carry financial burdens for repairs and recovery.

A few weeks ago we met with state Senator William Ligon, who represents the south coast, to discuss the Shore Protection Act amendments and our views of how that jurisdictional area should be regulated. At the very least, it would include DNR-mandated assessments of the shore and property damage at regular intervals to measure the impacts—ten years at the very least, more like five given how fast things are changing.

Most importantly, while some at the state level are addressing climate-change in terms of adaptation and resiliency of shorefront areas affected, no state agencies are willing to discuss reducing or eliminating the cause of climate-change.

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### *How will the president's rejection of the Paris Agreement affect the Georgia coast specifically?*

It's actually not a colossal failure, though it does send the wrong signal to the public and businesses about the reality and urgency of dealing with climate change. It also gives political cover to those who profit from fossil fuels. Pipelines, LNG, offshore drilling—all of those endeavors have their skids greased by this. It doesn't seem to matter that 800,000 people are already employed by various forms of clean energy while only 60,000 are employed by coal.

But the private sector is already moving in the direction of our best interest anyway, and many U.S. states and municipalities have vowed to uphold the tenets of the Paris agreement.

The rest of the world is on board and progress will continue regardless, though it may be retarded by U.S. withdrawal, and we can't afford that. We need

to get on as quickly as possible with the conversion from polluting greenhouse gases to sustainable energy sources.

### *What keeps your passion stoked after 20 years of this work of facing down the polluters and greed monsters with policy and reason?*

Believe it or not, my background is in industrial engineering, and I guess I have what you'd call a strong analytical core in terms of how I evaluate things qualitatively and quantitatively. That's also been a factor in tying together the economy and ecology of the coast. There's a gut-level connection between the resources and the techniques we can apply to protect them.

Look, irresponsibly exploiting our natural resources adversely affects our prosperity. We've got to have a rational economic assessment of what is no longer working [in our decision-making processes].

I wrote an essay recently about protecting Cumberland Island, and I do feel very strongly about maintaining the sanctity of honoring the principles of conservation. I talk about the coast as a compelling and engrossing form of nature to protect. The quality of life that's associated with those resources is unique and valuable, and that's why I've been here for 40 years doing this work.

At Center for a Sustainable Coast, we spend a good deal of effort trying to help the public understand how policy decisions affect our daily lives on the coast. We believe it make the difference in political outcomes that are more favorable to everyone.