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The state's sea level retreat

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BY ORRIN H. PILKEY

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DURHAM-- The plight of citizens in the tiny town of Pamlico, flooded by Hurricane Irene last August, has been in the news. Pamlico is one of dozens of small communities along the shorelines of Pamlico and Albemarle sounds. All are endangered by future storm surges, a risk that grows with rising sea level.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, North Carolina is at particular risk from flooding related to sea level rise, especially the Pamlico and Albemarle sounds region. Land slopes there are extremely gentle, often of the order of 1:10,000. This means that a 1 foot rise in sea level can flood inland on the mainland for 10,000 feet.

Because of this extraordinary flood risk, the State Division of Emergency Management was awarded \$5 million federal grant to carry out a Sea Level Rise Risk Study. The plan is to determine the effect of sea level rise on flooding and especially storm surges for a 40 cm. (16 inches) sea level rise and for a rise of 1 meter (39 inches). The 1 meter rise was considered the most likely scenario by 2100 in a 2010 report by the Science Panel of the state Coastal Resources Commission.



Other states' science panels have come to essentially the same conclusion. Science panels from Maine, Rhode Island, Florida, Louisiana, California and Washington state concluded that a sea level rise between 3 and 4 feet is a minimal expectation by 2100.

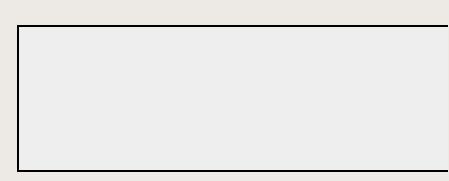
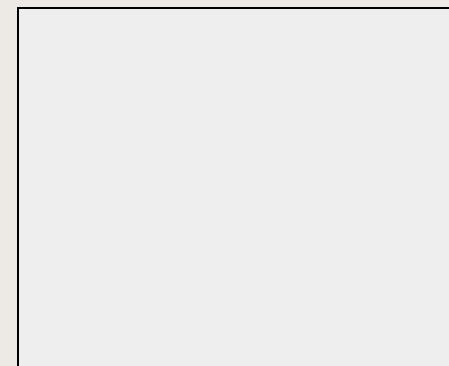
Enter NC-20, an organization lobbying for North Carolina's 20 coastal counties. Unfortunately, it plays down sea level rise and the risk that it carries for the future of coastal development. In so doing, the efforts of this group

have been anti-science. Now it has caused the Emergency Management division to report only on the risk afforded by a 40 cm. sea level rise and to not publicly report on the 1 meter rise.

NC-20 representatives have claimed repeatedly that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that the sea level would rise between 7 and 22 inches by 2100. Indeed the panel did give those numbers - but it also stated that "this range of values does not include the contribution of meltwater from Greenland and Antarctica - believed to be the most important sources of meltwater for sea level rise between now and 2100."

In a presentation to the General Assembly, NC-20 touted a list of 30 experts who are said not to believe the North Carolina science panel's numbers. These "experts" include one who wrote a pamphlet entitled "Sea Level Rise is the Greatest Lie Ever Told."

The vast majority of thousands of genuine specialists in related fields of global climate change support the principles behind the science panel's conclusions. The National Academy of Science, the Geological Society of America and the American Geophysical Union all have issued white papers supporting the likelihood of a major sea level rise by 2100.



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By insisting that a 1 meter rise not be analyzed, NC-20 has served to help withhold scientifically sound information from public view. The information is critical for the future of our coast. The dozens of towns, large and small, in North Carolina's lowermost coastal plain (e.g., Elizabeth City, Plymouth, Columbia, Cedar Island, Swan Quarter and Davis) are vulnerable already to hurricane storm surges. With a meter of sea level rise they will likely have to be moved, abandoned, elevated or diked. Shouldn't we be having honest discussions about this?

A 1 meter rise would also mean the end of development on barrier islands as we know it. Beach nourishment would be impossible and survival would require a massive wall around entire islands. Should we prohibit future high-rise development to retain some flexibility in our sea level rise response? Or should we keep our heads in the sand and hope the problem will solve itself?

The time has come for a full, healthy discussion about our coast and its future.

Orrin H. Pilkey is James B. Duke professor emeritus of earth sciences at Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment. He is co-author, with Rob Young, of "The Rising Sea."

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John Droz

Orrin's plea for a "full, healthy discussion about our coast and its future" is appropriate and welcomed.
As the editor of the 30+ page Critique of his SLR report, I am rather familiar with this entire matter.

That he dishonestly characterizes our efforts as being "anti-science" is indicative of his idea of a healthy discussion. My Critique is solely focused on the science of this matter. (See for yourself: <http://tinyurl.com/65788r4>.)

Further, contrary to his claims, I (nor anyone else I know at NC-20), do not dispute the possibility of NC SLR.

What is vigorously asserted is that the SLR report (co-authored by Orrin) is little more than a political position piece, that is a classic example of confirmation bias.

When Orrin and his associates are willing to talk exclusively about the science, then the conversation can begin.

John Droz, jr.
physicist & environmental advocate

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Dave Burton

Dr. Pilkey doesn't mention (and seems to be unaware of) the several detailed critiques of the CRC's report projecting 39" of sea level rise, which he defends. Here's mine:

<http://www.burtonsys.com/dlma...>

Here's an excerpt:

Unfortunately, the Report is riddled with errors. It is strikingly unscientific in its approach, and its conclusion is wildly wrong:

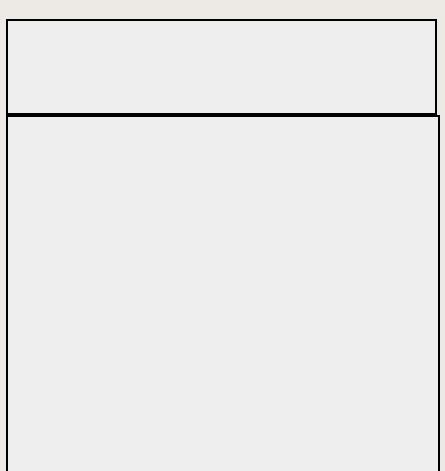
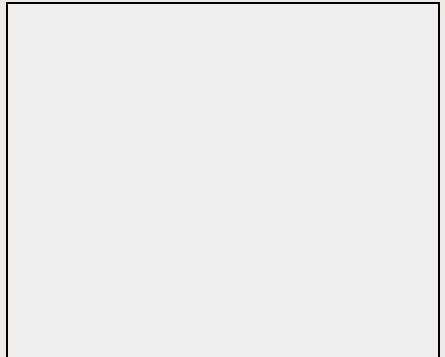
- It began by cherry-picking a single, outlier NC tide station as representative of the State, obviously chosen for its atypically large rate of recorded sea level rise.
- It used just 24 years of sea level data from that tide station, despite the fact that 32 years of data were available, and other NC tide stations had over 75 years of data available.
- It conflated sea level measurements from coastal tide gauges with mid-ocean sea level measurements from satellites, creating the illusion of an increase in rate of sea level rise.

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- Then it applied a discredited methodology from a fringe alarmist researcher, to justify predicting a wildly accelerated rate of sea level rise, far beyond even the IPCC's alarmist predictions.
- Then it exaggerated even his implausible projections.
- Worst of all, it never even mentioned the fact that the actual historical record of sea level has shown no sustained acceleration in rate of rise for over 80 years, neither globally, nor here in North Carolina. That is the single most important thing to know about sea level rise, but you can't learn it from this Report.

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water_warrior

There is a lot of controversy in the academic community about 'global warming' or 'global climate change.' Nevertheless Pilkey and others are correct about the NC coastline slipping under the water. He does site actual science from staunch institutions such as USGS.

What amazes me is that the word 'subsidence' is not even uttered.

So, for anyone who might be a bit curious about what this word means and how it relates to USGS and our state's coastline, it's worth the effort to type in a search string of "usgs + subsidence + north carolina coast". For those not familiar w/ the word subsidence, look that word up separately.

Few yrs back, a global warming/climate change debate was hosted in Hickory, NC and I as well as another colleague (w/ an environmental and a biology degree) were lucky enough to hear Dr. John Christie and Dr. William Schlesinger talk about this issue. What came out of that debate was the fact that it was pointed out in a slide show that the Gulf Coast AND the NC Coast (both OBX & IBX) won't be there in a few decades, it will slip under the waterline.....due to subsidence.

Dale Swiggett
Waterfront Sportsman & the Environmental Investigation Coalition
336.340.6299

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newpine

Orrin Pilkey should call Peter Gleick to check on the current status of the "science" of global warming.

In their zeal to control our lives, "scientists" have always touted their intellectual superiority. With global warming, scientist are now trying to predict the future with divination and witchcraft, and discarding intellectual honesty.

As for Pilkey, he has been predicting that the sea is going to "get us" for nearly 50 years. Comparatively, it is far more dangerous to live in Durham than it is to live in Mesic in Pamlico County.

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Roberto_Hecho

Head still in the sand I see...

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