

Tilting at windmills

By ANNE APPLEBAUM
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"Look there, friend Sancho Panza, where thirty or more monstrous giants rise up, all of whom I mean to engage in battle and slay, and with whose spoils we shall begin to make our fortunes."

— from "Don Quixote" by Miguel de Cervantes

To my eye, they are lovely: Graceful, delicate, white against green grass and a blue sky. Last summer my children and I stopped specially to watch a group of them, wheels turning in the breeze.

But to those who dislike them, the modern wind turbine is worse than ugly. It is an aesthetic blight, a source of noise pollution, a murderer of birds and bats. As for the still-young wind industry, it is "an environmental plunderer, with its hirelings and parasites using a few truths and the politics of wishful thinking to frame a house of lies." Far from being clean and green, "corporate wind is yet another extraction industry relying on false promises," a "poster child for irresponsible development."

Such attacks — those come from www.stopillwind.org, the Web site of Maryland anti-wind activist Jon Boone — are not atypical. Similar language turns up on www.wind-watch.org, on www.windstop.org, and on a dozen other anti-wind sites, most started by local groups opposed to a particular project.

Already, activists and real estate developers have stalled projects across Pennsylvania, West Virginia and New York. In Western Maryland, a proposal to build wind turbines alongside a coal mine, on a heavily logged mountaintop next to a transmission line, has just been nixed by state officials who called it too environmentally damaging. Along the coast of Nantucket Sound — the only sufficiently shallow spot on the New England coast — a coalition of anti-wind groups and summer homeowners, among them the Kennedy family, also seems set to block

Cape Wind, a planned offshore wind farm. Their well-funded lobbying last month won them the attentions of Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, who, though normally an advocate of a state's right to its own resources, has made an exception for Massachusetts and helped craft an amendment designed to kill the project altogether.

The groups do have some arguments, ranging from the aesthetic to the fact that wind will not soon replace coal or gas, that wind isn't always as effective as supporters claim, and that some people are going to make a lot of money out of it (though some people make a lot of money out of coal, and indeed Nantucket summer homes as well).

But they also reflect a deeper American malady. The problem plaguing new energy developments is no longer NIMBYism, the "Not-In-My-Back-Yard" movement. The problem now, as one wind-power executive puts it, is BANANAism: "Build Absolutely

Nothing Anywhere Near Anything." The anti-wind brigade, fierce though it is, pales beside the opposition to liquid natural gas terminals, and would fade entirely beside the mass movement that will oppose a new nuclear power plant. Indeed, the founders of Cape Wind say they embarked on the project in part because public antipathy prevents most other utility investments in New England.

Already, there are activists gearing up to fight the nascent biofuel industry, on the grounds that fields of switch grass or cornstalks needed to produce ethanol will replace rainforests and bucolic country landscapes. Soon the nonexistent "hydrogen economy" will doubtless be under attack as well. There's a lot of earnest, even bipartisan talk nowadays about the need for clean, emissions-free energy. But are we really ready, politically, to build any new energy sources at all?

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