
Introduction

Galveston Bay has received attention from ecology-minded popular writers and science-oriented students and professionals, but this effort by a historian explores how people have used the complex estuary since the earliest times. Such a history is a challenge and has led the writer into scholarly reports from many fields.

History, of course, relies on the judicious use of primary documents ranging from official records, to private correspondence, diaries, and memoirs, to books and newspapers, and more recently to oral and video interviews. Using documents written by participants and eyewitnesses whenever possible, the author, with the aid of colleagues expert in other fields, has compiled an overview of human activity in the bay area over a period of perhaps 14,000 years.

For the first 12,000 years, there were no written records and conclusions rely on what archaeologists have found and how it has been interpreted. When the first Spaniards visited the area in 1528 it was by accident, but a written account published in 1542 tells a great deal about the lifestyle of the indigenous nomads. Their simple use of the bay, primarily as a source for food, continued for almost three hundred years because the Spanish saw little of value along the Texas Gulf Coast and left it alone. French and Spanish documents reveal that a few French traders from New Orleans visited the bay in the 1700s to trade with the native population. This was a first step in using the bay for commerce: easy water transportation allowed traders to reach inland sites.

The nineteenth century brought dramatic changes in the use of the estuary: increased population and the exploitation of the bay stimulated by changes in technology. Political changes brought an influx of settlers from the United States in 1822, and within four years, the native people who had visited the bay annually were driven away or exterminated. The bay system became a means of transportation for newcomers and a way to market for agricultural produce.

The settlers immediately changed their frontier homes into replicas of those they had left. They replaced native plants and animals with domestic varieties which affected the ecology. Bay fishing continued for local use until the end of the 1800s when technology changed; mechanical ice and improved transportation led to commercial fishing. Merchants and shippers demanded deeper and straighter channels for the ever-increasing size of vessels entering Galveston Bay.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the bay was damaged by exploiters. Over harvesting threatened certain species, dredging channels and building jetties was changing water flow, and careless attitudes about dumping human waste into the waterways endangered

marine and human life. Increasing population in the twentieth century and industrialization around the bay compounded problems when underground water was extracted in great quantities resulting in subsidence. In the same uninformed mode, industrial wastes were discharged into the air, soil, and water.

Growing concern about all kinds of pollution led the federal government to enact laws to reverse the trend in the late 1960s. Progress has been made in cleaning up human and industrial wastes and marine life is improving. People who use and rely on the bay for their livelihood and leisure, continue to worry and work for more improvement to balance the needs of the various groups who want to use and enjoy the great estuary.