
Galveston Bay Over 14,000 Years: A Summary

For over 13,000 years humans used Galveston Bay and its environs as a source for sustenance, mainly food. The only changes they made were the gradual accumulation of piles of discarded shells from oysters, clams, and other trash scattered around the waterways.

The first European explorers between 1528 and 1722 found simple nomads harvesting the bounty of the bay and its shores. Finding no mineral riches, Europeans and first generation descendants visited Galveston Bay during the eighteenth century in order to trade manufactured goods to local river dwellers for desirable products of the forests. Nevertheless, efforts were made by both the French and the Spanish to map the promising bay. By 1815, the convenient harbor at Galveston Island attracted filibusters and privateersmen who claimed to be aiding Mexican republicans to gain independence from Spain. By 1822, Anglo American settlers began arriving intent on taming the wilderness around the bay in keeping with their nostalgia for their former homes.

It is only in the past 150 years that humans have severely altered Galveston Bay in the name of progress. A rapid geometric increase in population coupled with changing technology encouraged people to focus on the bay as a transportation system to aid settlement and the economic development of the area.

Exploitation of the area's natural resources was considered efficient and a positive good between 1850 and 1950. Over harvesting of turtles and oysters before the turn of the century almost wiped out both species. Beyond careless wildlife management, a development mind-set encouraged and allowed depletion and pollution of the basic elements.

To serve the ever-increasing population and the needs of mid-twentieth century industry and agriculture, underground water was exploited, resulting in subsidence, erosion, and silting. When subsurface water proved insufficient for modern needs, dams and canals brought surface water to the residents, farms, and industries around the bay and at the same time negatively affected the salinity in the bay's marine nurseries. In a similar mind-set, human and industrial wastes were dumped thoughtlessly without treatment into the waterways, soil, and air until health and esthetic demands raised a public outcry in the late 1960s.

When doom-sayers predicted the death of Galveston Bay in the 1970s, it was only hard-working optimists who were able to effect the necessary changes to improve the great estuary. Today, many diverse interests have recognized the importance of Galveston Bay to their lives and livelihoods. As a result, broad based efforts to protect the bay ecosystem are underway.