

GROWTH POSES DANGER TO WHOOPING CRANES

Growing neighborhoods upstream could keep freshwater from flowing downstream

BY TARA BOZICK

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Capt. Tommy Moore's business and other industry along the coast would suffer if coastal estuaries do not receive enough freshwater to sustain aquatic life.

If blue crabs struggle to survive, the whooping cranes that eat them would struggle, too, Moore said.

"When the whooping cranes suffer, we all suffer," said Moore of Rockport Birding and Kayak Adventures.

While housing development around critical territory might hurt the whooping cranes, so can people who live hundreds of miles away and never consider the endangered species.

The growing population of Texas will consume more water. And those growing neighborhoods upstream could keep freshwater from flowing downstream into coastal estuaries, retired Fish and Wildlife Service senior staff biologist Johnny French said.

"Sometimes there's a subtler problem 100 miles away in the watershed," French said, explaining that often people only see impact when developers build on or near habitat, rather than looking upstream.

Sediment and nutrients loads coming downstream provide food for marine life, such as the blue crab – the primary food source for the whooping cranes

"Whooping cranes need blue crabs," Tom Stehn, whooping crane coordinator at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, said. "If there's not inflows for bays, whooping cranes are going to suffer."

Freshwater flow to estuaries depends on several variables to maintain the ecological balance. While the whooping crane flock has reached record numbers this year with 241 cranes spotted so far, Stehn worries about the cranes' future, especially in times of drought.

As Texas grows, the state will have to meet new demands for water, said Mary Kelly, senior attorney with Environmental Defense.

Kelly said the state has a little time to work out a viable plan to prevent future endangered species litigation. San Antonio has been fighting for permits from the Edwards Aquifer Authority with increased pumping limits for years. Kelly said San Antonio continues to search for water sources and other growing Texas cities would likely follow suit.

Endangered species and tourism and fishing industries depend on the overall ecological health of the estuaries, she said.

“There’s a lot of dollars at stake,” Kelly said about the economic value of estuaries.

The Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority has been studying freshwater requirements for bay and estuary health for five years, including looking at the crane habitat and food stock. Senate Bill 3, passed in June, helps establish an environmental flows study process on a watershed-by-watershed basis, said Bill West, general manager for GBRA in Seguin.

“Freshwater flows are critical,” West said. “They’re just as important as water supply for human consumption.”

While the water bill takes on a more holistic, comprehensive view of water management, it is not necessarily ideal. It represents a compromise between the environmental groups that moves the issue forward, said Ken Kramer, state director for Sierra Club.

Kramer said the state needs to take action now to prevent problems in the future, citing how the Rio Grande River has stopped flowing into the Gulf during the past six or seven years. He said he is positive the process will work, as everyone has an interest in keeping estuaries healthy.

Ultimately, the federal government, which protects endangered species, would have to step in, mostly likely in court, according to French, the retired biologist.

“The water war will be fought in federal court,” French said. “I don’t think the estuaries are going to wind up total losers.”

Moore, who also is navigation district commissioner for Aransas County, said he’s already seen decline of marine life in Little Bay. He keeps abreast of the battles in northern watersheds, but ecology is tricky to manage.

As the captain takes tourists to see the whooping cranes almost daily during their winter nesting season, he understands the birds’ beauty and significance. He

said he doesn't know what process would be needed to keep a balance for wildlife to thrive.

"It's definitely an ongoing battle, and the people down here will continue to fight that battle," Moore said. "The habitat here is definitely fragile, but it's also self-healing."

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