

Wind Industry Money Behind Media Misinformation About Whale Deaths

Increased boat traffic and high-decibel sonar mapping of the ocean floor by the wind energy industry are behind the rising deaths of whales and other cetaceans off the East Coast over the last six years and could make the North Atlantic Right whale extinct, according to researchers featured in a new documentary, "Thrown To The Wind." Data analyst Lisa Linowes found that increased boat traffic from offshore wind construction strongly correlates with whale deaths. Researcher Rob Rand discovered the wind industry engaging in high-decibel sonar mapping, which scientists say can split mothers from their calves, send them to poorer feeding grounds to escape the noise, and drive them into highly trafficked boat lanes where they face a higher likelihood of being struck by a boat and killed.

The people who run the U.S. government agencies in charge of protecting the whales have either conducted similar research, come to the same conclusions, and covered them up, or they had not done the research, in which case they lied to the public when they claimed to have looked into the matter and determined that the wind industry was not behind the whale deaths. Either way, the killing of whales by the wind industry and the role of the US government is one of the greatest environmental scandals in the world.

And yet the mainstream news media have to date not only failed to cover it, they have themselves spread misinformation. The New York Times' top environment writer, Lisa Friedman, relied entirely on US government sources when she called the connection between the wind industry and whale deaths "misinformation." AP also relied entirely on government sources when it ran an article sub-headlined, "Whale Deaths Not Linked to Wind Prep Work." USA Today dismissed the connection as "cynical disinformation." And the Guardian falsely suggested that conservationists

raising the alarm had secret ties to “right-wing think tanks” and the oil and gas industry.

What’s more, the New York Times, the AP, the Guardian, USA Today, and most other mainstream news publications that have published articles on the North Atlantic Right Whale’s dwindling numbers either didn’t mention offshore wind construction as a potential factor or inappropriately dismissed it.

Not all mainstream media publications waved away a potential connection between the wind industry and the dead whales or dismissed all opponents of the project as lackeys of the fossil fuel industry. Bloomberg last November reported, “Planned wind projects off the New England coast threaten to harm the region’s dwindling population of endangered right whales, according to a US government marine scientist.” The reporter, Jennifer Dlhovey, even filed a Freedom of Information Act to get the information.

Dlhovey was the only mainstream reporter to report on the strongly-worded warning by scientist Sean Hayes of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. “Additional noise, vessel traffic, and habitat modifications due to offshore wind development will likely cause added stress that could result in additional population consequences to a species that is already experiencing rapid decline,” Hayes said in his letter, which Bloomberg quoted.

The Washington Post reported on the proximity of the dead whales to the wind turbine construction. “The [dead] humpback was one of nine large whales to get stranded over six weeks on or near beaches in the Northeast, not far from where developers of hundreds of offshore wind turbines are engaged in a flurry of preconstruction activity.”

And the Post was rare among publications in at least suggesting the whale conservationists were sincere in their concern. “We have an unprecedented

amount of whales dying here at the same time there is this industrial activity taking place on a scale that has never before happened in these waters,” Cindy Zipf, executive director of Clean Ocean Action, told the Washington Post. “Why is this not being investigated? Why are these companies getting a pass?”

But even the piece by the Post suggested that most of the opposition to the wind industry was coming from the fossil fuel industry, and ran articles headlined “The Value of Offshore Wind” and “An Ideal Setting For Offshore Wind Technology” about one of the East Coast wind farms.

What’s more, the Post, Bloomberg, and any of the news media organizations could have done what Environmental Progress and Public did and bought publicly available data on boat traffic and whale strandings, asked a data analyst to look for correlations, and worked with a scientist to conduct underwater acoustic measurements near a boat hired by the wind industry to map the ocean floor with sonar.

Instead, these publications promoted the wind industry. The Guardian ran an article headlined, “Winds of change: celebrating 30 years of offshore wind energy.” Politico called offshore wind a “green energy panacea” and the “key to European jobs, growth, and industrial revival.” And Reuters ran a story headlined, “Achieve 30 GW of Offshore Wind by 2030.

Why is that? Why, given the massive significance of this story, one involving the potential extinction of an entire whale species, and occurring so close to where most mainstream news reporters live, has their coverage been so biased?

Money Money Money

Mainstream news media organizations claim they cover environmental issues, from climate change to species extinction to energy, ethically and objectively. They say that they have strict rules and regulations on how they

approach potential conflicts of interest and that there are clear boundaries between editorial teams and advertising departments.

However, an investigation by Environmental Progress and Public finds that the Hewlett Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and Walton Foundation, which invest hundreds of millions of dollars advocating for renewable energy subsidies, donated millions to the Associated Press for its journalism on energy and the environment.

Hewlett Foundation has long funded the Conservation Law Foundation, Grid Lab and other organizations advocating for building wind turbines along most of the East Coast. Hewlett's grants were specifically targeted for the "accelerated development of offshore wind."

Funding from George Soros' Open Society Foundations (OSF) helped pay for the Guardian's article falsely claiming that the only people concerned about a connection between the wind industry and whale deaths were "right-wing think tanks." Soros, over the last decade, invested a reported \$1 billion in renewables and other climate technology. And recently, the new president of OSF, Alex Soros, said "civilization is in danger of collapsing because of the inexorable advance of climate change."

AP justified these grants to Public by insisting that they didn't affect their coverage. "No funder has any influence over AP journalism," a spokesperson for AP told Public. Hewlett says they take a "hands-off" approach and that they "exercise no editorial control." The Walton Family Foundation gave AP \$2,500,000. According to Walton, "AP retains complete editorial control."

But the money was specifically part of an advocacy effort by the philanthropies and the Rockefeller Foundation, which makes its renewables-only bias clear to grantees. According to the Rockefeller Foundation's tax forms, its grant to AP was awarded "In support of launching a climate coverage initiative that will include reporting on the increased and urgent need for reliable, renewable electricity in underserved communities worldwide."

AP might argue that the grants were not a conflict of interest because they did not come from the wind industry but instead from philanthropy.

But wind corporations, including Orsted, GE, and Siemens Energy, with a direct interest in building the East Coast wind farms, funded several news media organizations directly, including the Associated Press, the Baltimore Sun, Bloomberg, Axios, Financial Times, Huffington Post, Insider NJ, the NJ Spotlight, the New York Times, Politico, Reuters, the Guardian, Time Magazine, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post

Public contacted 17 news media companies for this investigation, and nine responded. Several companies told Public that accepting money from the renewables industry was consistent with the practices of other media organizations and that their “ethics and values” sections delineate clear firewalls between the advertising and editorial departments.

“There is an absolute divide between the Guardian’s journalism and the advertising that we carry,” a spokesperson for the Guardian said, “which in no way affects our editorial coverage.”

But the Guardian designed Orsted’s paid advertisements to look like Guardian News content in a 12-part, two-year-long branded content project called “Power of Green.” The project involved a “multimedia execution [that] leveraged a variety of formats including an animated explainer video, an interactive experience, an infinite scroll immersive journey, and feature articles.” These posts are labeled as “paid for by Orsted,” but many casual readers may not recognize the difference, especially since the paper has an entire section dedicated to wind energy reporting.

The Guardian’s approach is typical of corporate media. The Washington Post has the “Creative Group.” Bloomberg News has “Bloomberg Media Studios.” The Financial Times has “FT Commercial.” The New York Times has T-Brand. The Baltimore Sun has “Studio 1847.”

Direct industry conflicts abound:

- The New York Times published an interactive article about how the wind industry has grown and how Orsted is at the forefront of the movement. One paid post read, “Transitioning to renewable energy will not only lead to a cleaner planet — it’ll also be vital for economic growth”;
- The Washington Post published sponsored content for Avangrid, Siemens, and Chevron and ran an article headlined “An Ideal Setting for Offshore Wind Technology” and “The Value of Offshore Wind”;
- Reuters held an Offshore Wind conference that was sponsored by a number of energy companies, including Siemens Energy, National Grid Ventures, and Shell;
- In July 2021, Axios hosted a virtual event called Energy Forward: The Future of Alternative Energy, sponsored by GE, which has a major wind energy division, and featured the former CEO of GE Renewable Energy as a panelist;
- The Baltimore Sun’s expansive paid post in partnership with Orsted claims, “Our Future will be Powered by Wind,” has a special pull-out box, “Preserve Marine Life,” which claims that industrial offshore wind projects will serve as “marine preservation areas”;
- Bloomberg’s sponsors include wind industry component makers, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Siemens, and Cisco;
- The Financial Times published sponsored content for Vestas, EDP Renewables, Hekel, Fujitsu Global, and ENI. One FT article headline read, “Renewables drive stronger returns. It’s time to redirect investment.” The “partner content,” as FT calls it, was sponsored by Vestas, the world’s largest wind turbine manufacturer;
- Huffington Post produced a sponsored article for NRG Energy in 2014;
- Insider NJ had a paid contract with PSE&G and published “sponsored content” headlined, “An Environmentally Responsible Plan to Bring Clean Offshore Wind Energy to New Jersey,” which claimed that “construction activities will be timed to avoid impacts on endangered species, such as the North Atlantic Right Whale, which migrates along the Jersey shore each year”;
- Orsted and PSE&G help fund NJ Spotlight News;
- Politico published sponsored content from Enbridge, Orsted, Polska Grupa Energetyczna, and Equinor;

- Time Magazine published sponsored content for ABB Energy Industries, which has a wind energy division;
- The Wall Street Journal published sponsored content for Deloitte, which has a robust renewable energy consultancy.

Why, in the end, did so many mainstream news journalists fail to investigate and otherwise fairly report on one of the biggest environmental stories in the world? Part of the reason is surely their spiritual bias toward renewables. Another is their monomania around climate change. But surely another is that the corporations that stand to make billions of dollars building wind turbines along the East Coast gave their employers millions of dollars.

Betrayal Of Journalism And Philanthropy

We cannot prove that the wind industry money is what caused the poor reporting by mainstream news media companies. Journalists are also lazy, obedient, and ideological. And, as noted above, two news media outlets, Bloomberg and the Washington Post, did better than other publications. And one of the most biased stories came from a publication, USA Today, for which we could find no evidence of wind industry advertising.

But funding from the wind industry corporations that stand to benefit directly from the construction of massive new wind turbines to news media companies constitutes a financial conflict of interest by any definition, including the definition that mainstream news media companies use when evaluating others. For decades, the media have attacked fossil fuel companies for funding think tanks skeptical of climate change, for example, because it creates the very same conflict of interest created when the wind industry funds news media companies.

The fact that this is the standard operating procedure of mainstream news media companies doesn't change the fact that it's a conflict of interest. Nor should the insistence from spokespersons for the news media companies that there is a firewall between the advertising departments and the news departments reassure us. The fact of the matter is that without the advertising money, the news media companies would not have the resources to hire the staff and publish the stories. As such, without the

advertiser funding, it's unlikely that the news media companies would exist, at least in their present form.

Conflicts of interest create biases in myriad other ways. While news organizations speak of "firewalls," they operate as a single business with a single staff. Employees talk with each other, and a common culture is developed. Most employees want to see their employers succeed, and that includes financially. As such, employees, including supposedly objective news reporters, are biased in favor of the advertisements with their employer, whether they are involved in negotiating fees and accepting payments.

While the funding of news media organizations by philanthropies that advocate for wind energy may be less of a conflict of interest than funding from the wind industry directly, it's still a conflict of interest and may have played a larger role than corporate money.

There is a common culture among many advocates of renewables and news reporters in organizations like the New York Times, Washington Post, and other publications. Anyone who has watched the interactions between renewable energy advocates and ostensibly objective and independent reporters on social media platforms like X, formerly Twitter, knows of the conviviality and camaraderie between the two groups that is grossly inappropriate, given that the latter are supposed to be skeptical of the former. Our research suggests that one reason for this may be that they share the same funders.

Whatever the case, the fact that practically the entire environmental press corps spent the last six years watching whales die at abnormal rates as the wind industry expanded its activities without asking hard questions, or doing the most basic research, is a serious indictment of their journalism.

It's also a serious indictment of philanthropy. Attempting to correlate increased boat traffic from the wind industry to whale deaths would have been precisely the kind of investigative journalism that Hewlett, Rockefeller, and Open Society Foundations claim to want to support. And yet one gets the feeling that nobody in any of those news media organizations would

have dared suggesting anything like it for the simple fact that they know those philanthropies are in favor of industrializing the eastern seaboard with wind turbines, not against it.

The experience of researching the news media opened our eyes to the reality of what passes for environmental journalism, and we hope it changes how people think of the news media. Though they claim to be platforms for fair, objective, and accurate investigative journalism, they have proven to be platforms for biased and oftentimes mean-spirited hit pieces against the people actually doing investigative journalism.