

OPINION



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For the birds

Our position: NASA's proposal to plow its coastal refuge mustn't get off the ground

What part of the word "refuge" doesn't NASA understand? The federal Migratory Bird Conservation Act defines it as "an inviolate sanctuary" that's designed to "protect migratory birds... and other species of wildlife that are listed... as endangered species or threatened species."

NASA has a different take. It's considering turning 200 acres in the magnificent Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, or possibly 200 acres a few miles northwest along the Cape Canaveral National Seashore, into a dual launchpad complex for private users.

So much for the inviolate sanctuary. And so much for the wood storks, scrub jays, bald eagles, white pelicans, roseate spoonbills and other "protected" species that have found "refuge" there.

So much, too, for the refuge's conservation plan, which promotes maintaining the integrity of natural resources and fostering environmental education.

Here's what NASA's teaching: Conservation is OK, but commercialism is better, especially when the space agency is eager to find jobs for hundreds of its workers after it phases out the shuttle in 2010. That, in part, is what's driving the "Commercial Vertical Launch Complex."

We're strong supporters of NASA's economic engine, which inarguably helps drive much of Central Florida's high-tech commercial-sector growth.

But there's no arguing for this

harebrained scheme rising inside one of the nation's premier refuges, or along an undisturbed stretch of national seashore that's home to an equally spectacular array of particularly vulnerable wildlife.

The jobs NASA wants to save — and the business those jobs would help attract and sustain — instead should relocate to what's now an abandoned launchpad complex at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station. Except NASA, which doesn't own that tract, doesn't want to bother.

Hard to believe, right? That one of the nation's boldest agencies — where else in government do they literally reach for the stars? — proved too timid or too unimaginative to reach an accommodation with the Air Force that could spare the refuge a new complex the size of Sea World?

But there it is in the executive summary of the engineering firm hired by NASA to explore locations. It says potential launch sites "were to be contained entirely within current Kennedy Space Center property lines."

Never mind that the law creating Cape Canaveral National Seashore in 1975 seems to preclude NASA from even developing one of the sites. No new construction, it says, shall be permitted within the seashore except to advance the health and safety of the visiting public.

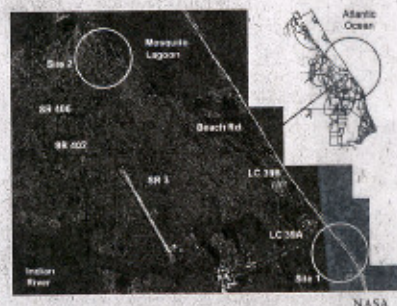
That public now is protesting by the hundreds NASA's crass plan. Florida's congressional delegation should join them in opposing the space agency's designs on the refuge.

A treasure to behold

Who would want to ruin this?

THE REFUGE:

- Is inhabited by more than 500 different species of wildlife.
- Encompasses 140,000 acres, consisting of marshes, coastal dunes, scrub oaks and palm and oak hammocks.
- Is home to 15 wildlife species that are considered threatened or endangered, including nesting bald eagles, 2,500 Florida scrub jays, many osprey nests and up to 400 manatees.
- Is part of the nation's National Wildlife Refuge System.



Source: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service