

The Nature Conservancy and Shell Oil Form Unlikely Partnership to Save Important Bird Nesting Site

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Created 03/08/2012 - 5:17pm



Brown pelicans on Texas' Shamrock Island during the early morning. Shell Oil has partnered with The Nature Conservancy to help restore the island. (Photo: Erika Nortemann via The Nature Conservancy)

Each year, 19 bird species inhabit the small 110-acre Shamrock Island Preserve in Corpus Christi Bay on Texas' southeastern coast. Among the 24,000 birds nesting on the small island and state Important Bird Area each year include the reddish egret and white-faced ibis. But, because of soil erosion from winter storms, Shamrock Island is in poor condition and the Nature Conservancy is going to help—with the assistance of the largest oil and gas companies in the world.

In what would first appear a strange match, Shell Oil has committed to providing \$500,000 for the first phase of the \$2.3 million restoration of the island, which is one only four natural islands on the Texas coast that provides a predator-free nesting site for birds, according to a [Nature Conservancy press release](#) ^[1].

“If we are going to preserve Texas’ amazing natural legacy for future generations, we need all sectors – private, business, public and non-profits – investing in on-the-ground conservation opportunities like Shamrock Island,” said Laura Huffman, Texas state director of The Nature Conservancy, in the release.

But Shell Oil Company is a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell, one of the twenty largest oil and gas companies in the world, according to PetroStrategies, Inc. [2], which provides strategic analysis and planning on the industry. And from 2006-2010, Shell Oil's refinery, Shell Puget Sound in Washington, was fined \$291,000 by the state for Clean Air Act violations, according to the Environmental Protection Agency's Enforcement & Compliance History Online [3]. The facility has also been listed [3] as a "high priority violator" of the act since 2008.

Still, Shell Puget Sound is over 2,000 miles from Shamrock, and Shell Oil has long advocated for the environment, generating emission-free electricity from wind, which saves about 1 million tons of CO2 a year, compared to coal-fired plant, according to the company's website [4]. In addition, Mars B, the company's deepwater project in the Gulf of Mexico, includes \$5 million in its budget for environmental, education, and community causes, according to the Associated Press [5].

Audubon Texas state director Bob Benson explained the office has had a positive relationship with Shell Oil. While Benson noted that following national procedure for procuring contributions is important, he said that a priority is finding funding to pay wardens monitoring birds along the Texas coast, including the Corpus Christi Bay where Shamrock Island is located.



"My interest is in the resource they provide," Benson said of companies like Shell Oil. "Of course we want to find legitimate sources of funding that lets us do our work and that doesn't conflict with our mission."

Texas' Shamrock Island. (Photo: Texas General Land Office)

Shell Oil recognizes the importance of making the most of existing natural resources, explained Mary Grace Anderson, Shell's development manager and decision executive for the Mars B 'Olympus' tension-leg platform, in the press release.

"This is one of the reasons we are proud to partner with The Nature Conservancy to restore Shamrock Island and ensure a sustainable habitat for nesting birds for years," Anderson said.

As for the eroded Shamrock Island, whose grassy flats are visited by an estimated 6,000 pairs of laughing gulls, the birds would probably be grateful for help—from wherever it comes.

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