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Environment

Canary Islands vs. Big Oil

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Between the continents of Europe and Africa, and a running jump to the Americas, more than 12 million people visit the Canary Islands each year.

Three of the seven volcanic isles are world heritage sites, maintaining unique ecosystems, conservation land and a home for abundant sea life. They may also provide Europe with a renewable energy role model, stepping stones metaphorically to a sustainable future, as the archipelago aims for total self-sufficiency in 2025.

But in March 2012, the Spanish government approved prospects for oil exploration off the islands of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura, both of which are UNESCO biosphere reserves, describing the project as a potential solution to the country's 26 billion euro deficit. If predictions are correct, it could be the biggest oil find in Spanish history.

Thousands of Canary Islands residents and activists have begun campaigning against Spanish oil company Repsol, and the potential oil spill that could devastate the wildlife and tourist and fishing industries. Local campaigners have demonstrated on all major islands and taken to the streets of Madrid in order to stop the drilling.

As an "Autonomous Community," the Canaries are politically part of Spain but divided into two autonomous provinces of Tenerife and Las Palmas. They have their own government, parliament and administration and recognized as having their own "nationality" by the Spanish people.

As one of Spain's most attractive holiday destinations, hundreds of thousands of livelihoods would be put at risk from pollution. Drilling will be deep, up to 6,000 meters, with wells within 18 miles of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura. An investigation by environmentalists will research the impact on ocean life where over 50,000 plant and animal species have been identified.

Both islands have little rainfall so there's a possibility of sea contamination, as islanders' drinking water is supplied by desalinated sea water. Trade winds would further the potential spillage area. Concern that deep sea drilling causes earth tremors, for many, just adds to the feeling that drilling doesn't make sense. These are volcanic islands and naturally prone to seismic activity.

But the unveiling of the new reform of the Spanish electrical system in July, 2013 has swept further disharmony over the islands. Its 3.5 billion euro cut in the renewable energy sector each year raises eyebrows over Spain's longterm conviction to ecological development.

A new tax on solar panels has been introduced charging high fees for grid use so that it is effectively no longer economical for households to generate their own energy. The new law has been criticized by the Spanish National Energy Commission and provoked national anger, but anyone refusing to connect to the grid could face fines of up to 30 million euros.

Sustainability Under Siege

Rumors of civil unrest are circulating along with doubts that Spain will now reach the EU's 2020 renewable energy goal. But while the world awaits the outcome, one that affects the whole mechanism of alternative energy production,

it may just have set the precedent for other nations to claim the sun.

It's sad news for El Hierro, the smallest isle expected to become one of the first in the world using 100% renewable energy. The hybrid hydro-wind plant has received international recognition for pioneering technology and its Zero Waste scheme. If it's successful in utilizing natural resources of wind, sea and even volcanic craters, it could be a breakthrough for other isolated communities.

The Sustainability Plan was approved over 16 years ago but stems back to the sixties and took years of conviction to realize. New local jobs, a boost in tourism as El Hierro becomes a center for scientific research, along with profits that will be reinvested into the community, are part of the project's development.

With over 30% unemployment and a history of drought and emigration, sustainability could spell a new era for islanders. Perhaps it's time the island's luck changed, as volcanic activity left it abandoned in 2011. But estimates of saving over 1.8 billion euros a year, as well as 6,000 tons of diesel and 18,700 tons of CO₂, have been iced as local owners and developers find themselves battling over rights and tariffs, under governmental review.

It's not the first time that the Canaries have held off the oil exploration. Repsol's first proposal in 2001 was refused three years later after claims of "deficient environmental controls." Public opinion hasn't changed and controversy has followed over pollution risks and the income drilling would generate through a forecast 20-year lifespan.

Three to five thousand new jobs have been cited, a claim that's disputed as the work will require highly trained specialists. A recent Environmental Impact Study was made unavailable to the two islands it directly affected. Yet if the oil exploration is successful, it could reduce Spain's fuel imports by 10%, 7.5 billion euros will be invested into the Canaries, and the oil fields could produce up to 150,000 barrels of oil a day.

Explorations are due to start in 2014, to determine the boundaries of mining area, which is within 30 miles of Moroccan shores. In yet another area of contention, Morocco has warned of a border violation and already began its own survey.

The deal is tempting, however, in these genuinely hard times. The global crisis that struck Spain's housing market five years ago dive-bombed into the loss of thousands of jobs and a major recession. Now 5.9 million Spanish people are unemployed, the highest figure since the 1930s, with 55% of young people aged 16-24 out of work.

An estimated 350,000 families have been evicted since 2008; some now squat in empty buildings or live on the streets. For the first time ever, Red Cross has asked for donations to help the Spanish population. A brief respite of social justice came from firemen refusing to carry out the eviction of an 85-year-old woman from her home.

According to the charity Cáritas, over 30% of the Canary population is now under the poverty line. The islands have the third highest unemployment rate in the European Union, with 62% of the youth unemployed. Lack of opportunities will force many islanders, like their peers in the mainland, to leave home to find work in other countries.

Yet the local population is united in keeping oil drilling out, and gaining international support from organizations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and World Wildlife Fund in defense of more than 300 protected areas, 43 special zones for birds and 11 marine reserves that are visited by whales, dolphins and turtles. As an important study area for educators in marine science and universities of oceanography, these resources are also backed by a number of academic institutions.

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The islands' stand for a future that respects its environment and social, economic and cultural development should be praised; it's a gift for others. Now as local movements start up and flyers are handed out to tourists on the beaches, the numbers of protesters are slowly growing.

But the opponent that islanders face over the next few years is a tale of David and Goliath, and time is running low. People need an economy, a roof over their heads and food on the table, but is there an alternative other than destroying the planet? As earth's resources deplete and oil companies are forced to mine in new remote places, these two islands could be any number in the world — any parallel community facing the crisis of sustainability and survival.

[November/December 2013, ATC 167](#)