

Nov. 23, 2004

A blight on the beautiful Gaspé

JAMES FERRABEE
in Montreal

In the 1980s solar power caught the imagination of environmentalists and energy experts who saw the power of the sun as a way to save the planet from the scourge of fossil fuels like oil and gas. But 25 years later, very few people in North America or Europe light their living rooms or power their TVs from the sun.

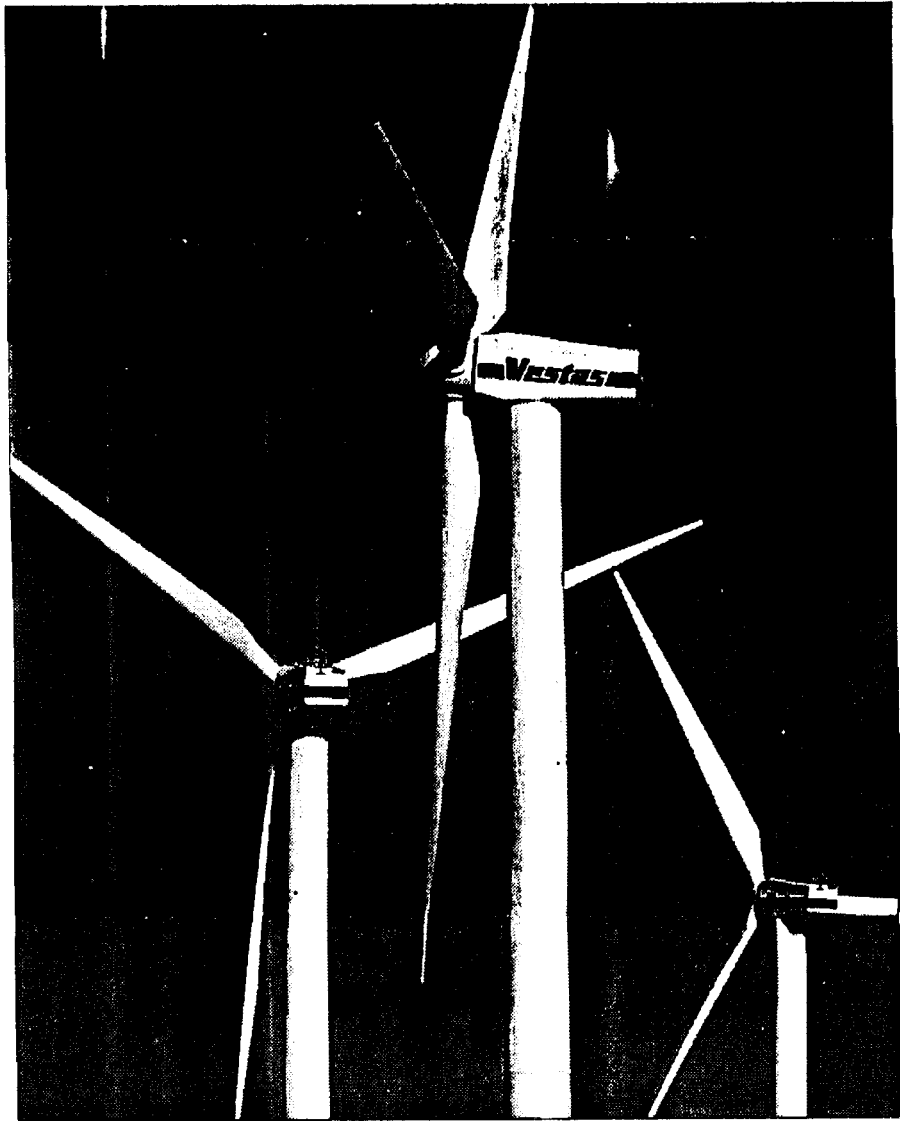
Now wind power is being touted as the next saviour of the planet because it is so readily available and, supposedly, free. But wind is not so readily available as it appears at first glance. It does not blow at the same strength for 24 hours a day. And wind power is not free because it costs an enormous amount to construct dozens of the 248-foot towers needed to assemble a wind farm, then maintain it.

In addition, wind power causes its own visible and noise pollution problems, not to mention the probability the propellers will kill bird life if put up on land, and disrupt shipping and ocean life if built out at sea. None of this has grabbed the attention of Canadians yet, but East Coast Americans and Western Europeans are furiously debating advantages and disadvantages of wind power.

In Canada, Quebec and Alberta lead the country in wind power generation. But on Oct. 4, Hydro-Quebec announced major plans for the coastline of the beautiful Gaspé Peninsula of Quebec that will add 990 megawatts to Canada's wind power capacity — from its present 440 megawatts — between now and 2012. The government-owned utility says it will provide enough power for about 400,000 homes a year or four-fifths of the annual consumption of a large aluminum smelter.

André Caille, head of Hydro-Quebec, boasts that the \$1.9-billion project is without doubt the beginning of a great adventure for Quebec. Not everyone agrees. At least, few Quebecers were asked whether they supported the "great adventure" that will plant dozens of wind generators in the hills behind such small, scenic coastal towns as Baie des Sables, St. Ulric, Les Méchins and Carleton. These towns rest on the shoreline of the St. Lawrence where passes the much-travelled 400-kilometre-long tourist route known as Route 132.

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the visual and historic values of the areas like Nantucket Sound.

The Alliance is backed by the U.S. Beacon Hill Institute, which said in a May, 2004, report: "The economic costs of the (Nantucket) project exceed the benefits by US\$209-million. Based on these numbers, it does not make sense, from a societal point of view, to build the project."

In April of this year, professor David Simpson of the David Hume Institute in Scotland — a major site for Britain's ambitious wind power program — said

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"Wind farms disfigure the countryside and threaten to cost one billion pounds (\$2.2-billion Canadian) a year. From sacred cow to white elephant is a short jump." And a report from a private power company in Britain at the end of October said wind power was unreliable, inefficient and threatens power cuts.

Up to now in Canada there has been no vocal opposition to the creation of giant wind farms in historic and scenic parts of the country and little public debate about the concept. One reason may be that none of this is real for city dwellers, whose playgrounds like Halifax Harbour; Mount Royal in Montreal; Toronto Island, a short canoe ride from the heart of the country's largest city; and Grouse Mountain, overlooking Vancouver, obviously will not be targeted for wind farms

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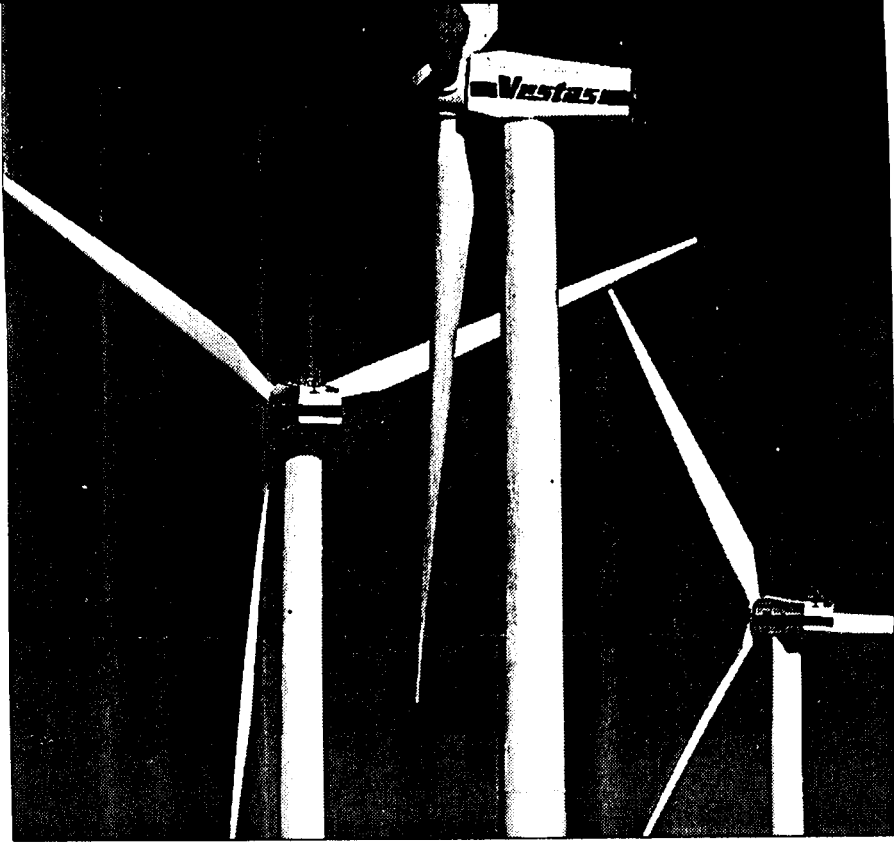
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A hint of the debate to come in Canada may be seen in the reaction to the first off-shore wind power system in the United States, called the Cape Wind project, scheduled to be built in Nantucket Sound. A group called the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound is lobbying against the scheme, arguing that there is no regulatory system in place to judge the viability of wind power projects. They also say there are no studies to inform residents of the area of the economic impact or the cost to taxpayers, and no assessment of the degradation of



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bluntly: "The message of the data is clear. At the present time, the financial cost of generating electricity from the wind is roughly twice that of generating electricity from the cheapest alternative conventional sources."

Added the influential British weekly, *The Economist*, in an article last July:

"Wind farms disfigure the countryside and threaten to cost one billion pounds (\$2.2-billion Canadian) a year. From sacred cow to white elephant is a short jump." And a report from a private power company in Britain at the end of October said wind power was unreliable, inefficient and threatens power cuts.

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So, before we proclaim victory against our profligate use of fossil fuels in the last 50 years, politicians and environmental groups might ponder the huge costs in dollars and in environmental damage before 20-storey windmills festoon our coastlines, our sea lanes and our beautiful Quebec hills.

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