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## Editorial

### In the face of doom, so what?

**The deceptively comforting term, "North Atlantic Oscillation," actually serves to make it more likely that the Gulf of Mexico will suffer the increased number of hurricanes, not the Atlantic Coast.**

James Elsner and Steven Bell don't know each other. But both specialize in long odds, the stock in trade of both is an apparently unstoppable force headed for the beaches, and neither eyes the other as warily as their self-interest might seem to justify.

Elsner, a Florida State University climatologist, sees the Gulf of Mexico as on the toddler end a generation-long era of hurricane activity not seen since the 1940s and '50s. For Bell, the unstoppable force is an economy and lending policies that seems to open the door to beach homeownership wider by the day. The Sunnyside-based Emerald Coast Mortgage Inc. president says people are buying homes, beach houses and rental property at a level not seen since who-knows-when - "buying property left and right, often with no money in their own pocket."

Bell's job as a mortgage broker is to help people who feel overwhelmed by a buying process he says many don't realize has been simplified and made easier, while Elsner is one of a growing number of experts who seek to simplify and make easier the relatively young and extremely inexact science of hurricane forecasting.

Elsner told *The News Herald's* Kevin Porter this past week that he sees big ones pummeling the Gulf of Mexico over the next 20 years or so, even two or three times as many as over the past 30 years. The projection is tied to his interpretation of sustained periods in which the rise and fall of air pressure over the Azores at the westernmost edge of the Gulf Stream is mirrored into a push-pull effect over Iceland some 3,000 miles to the north.

The deceptively comforting term for the Azores-Iceland coupling, the "North Atlantic Oscillation," actually serves to make it more



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likely that the Gulf of Mexico will suffer the increased number of hurricanes, not the Atlantic Coast.

Elsner was among scientists presenting findings at this month's annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C. If his projection of Mother Nature going on a two-decade broom-wielding spree along the gulf seems ambitiously prescient, consider the work of a Louisiana State University colleague, geography professor Kam-biu Liu.

By analyzing telltale dune-lake sand layers going back eons, Liu concludes that "in the past 1,000 years there has been a very low incidence of major hurricane landfalls along the Gulf Coast." He's not as sanguine about the next 1,000 years, not at all. For that matter, one of the most bubble-bursting presentations at the AAAS meeting came from a University of Pennsylvania professor contending that astronomers and scientists are all wet in their commonly held belief that the Earth has 5 billion years left before the sun collapses and incinerates us all; more like 500 million years, he told stunned scientists.

Bell wouldn't know of people dissuaded by hurricane fears from buying on the beach; by the time people call him to figure out a way to finance the purchase, they're pretty determined. He predicts with some confidence that the world's end will not come soon enough to exempt any from mortgage payments. Even Elsner suggests that residents along the gulf need not spend the next couple of decades fearing The Big One, although The Big One might well come.

The Gulf Coast has become so built-up during relatively calm decades that a run-of-the-mill hurricane could be just as catastrophic if it hits in the right place, Elsner points out. Living along the 1,600-mile U.S. Gulf Coast is "risky business. But the chances of a particular home getting damaged are still small."

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