

# Age of pandemics makes traveling a sore subject



**KATHLEEN PARKER** says sneezing infants and hand sanitizer are just some of the challenges of flying during the outbreak of H1N1 flu.

**I**N THE MIAMI AIRPORT — Against the advice our vice president, I have braved the germ-infested world, forced into transit by prior commitments and surrounded by strangers who may not recently have washed their hands.

My own, of course, are scabbed from repeated scrubbing through all four lines of *Happy Birthday to You*, which, my epidemiologist-neighbor tells me, is how long you have to keep the soap on your hands to do any good.

At this writing, I am sequestered in a small partitioned area of Miami International Airport. I have just downed my second vial of ImmuGo — the immune system-boosting superdose of vitamins and minerals “famous among celebrities,” according to the package. I figure celebrities know what they’re doing when it comes to warding off germs.

Otherwise, I’m more or less trying not to breathe. Thus far, I have not donned a face mask, but my tote contains 10 respirator-type masks that, if worn, would so frighten people that their germs would scramble to avoid me.

Such is life on the road during “The Age of Pandemics.”

That was *The Wall Street Journal* headline on Saturday, when I began my journey. On the same day, *The Washington Post* devoted about two pages to the virus, which we should no longer call “swine flu” out of deference to our porcine friends, who were being slaughtered for no reason whatsoever. We don’t get swine flu from swine, apparently.

But it’s easier to get hysterical over something named for a beast best known for unhygienic behavior than the less-horrifying H1N1, the official name of the virus formerly believed to be a crisis. It may yet become scary, we are forced to admit, but for now H1N1 appears to be no worse than regular flu. The rate of contagion is in about the same range as those of other strains.

Yet the stories with which all are now familiar have been screaming panic. And so we have panicked — closing schools, eschewing shopping and otherwise behaving oddly.

Ahem. Not only have I packed enough medical paraphernalia to supply a small Caribbean island, but I hold my fellow man in less than compassionate esteem. I am not alone.

*In the Restroom:* I notice the women on

either side of me washing their hands. Their lips are moving. I recognize *Feliz cumpleaños*.

*On the Plane:* The woman next to me pulls out her Purex as I unwrap one of my handy instant-sanitizing wipes. We smile at each other with a mixture of understanding and embarrassment. As a mother and baby pass, the little darling turns her runny nose toward us and coughs as though possessed by snarling demon dogs. “Aw, she’s precious, isn’t she?” I say to my seatmate. We roll our eyes.

Suddenly, I’m overwhelmed with a need to cough. That is because my lungs are filled with pollen, but I dare not clear my throat for fear the other passengers will turn on me. Not even the air marshal will try to save me as they toss my allergy-racked body from the plane.

Inexplicably, I confess this urge to my seatmate. Perhaps I am hoping she will take mercy on me when the others come. She says she wants to cough, too. We are now bonded in suppressed-cough, anti-infant solidarity. We wash our hands again and laugh at ourselves. I have no idea if this woman is still alive.

My next flight is like that screen saver of

flying toasters — hot, small and crowded. This is an all-adult flight to Key West where most of the passengers are going to

relax. (I am joining other journalists for a forum on the intersection of religion and public life.)

There is something palpably different in the air this time — nary a care that, as my new seatmate informs me, can’t be corrected with a few margaritas. The flight attendant glides down the aisle proffering beer and wine. Out the window, the sky opens and the water turns a color that doesn’t have a name yet. “Blue Heaven,” perhaps.

*Key West:* Two days later, I have not heard a pip about illness. My mind is luxuriating in questions about the neuroscience of religious experience, the scientific evidence of God, the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr on Barack Obama. The flu does not exist for me.

Ignorance may not be bliss, but when it comes to H1N1, the less you know may be good for you.

*Parker is a columnist for The Washington Post Writers Group. She can be e-mailed at kparker@kparker.com.*



JERRY LARA : SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

**IN FLIGHT:** Whooping cranes fly over the grasslands of the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge late in 2008. Last winter was a difficult one for the cranes.

# Human use of river water is killing whooping cranes

## Higher salinity in bays is reducing crab population

By **RON SASS** and **JIM BLACKBURN**

**T**HE winter of 2008/2009 was the worst in recent history for the whooping crane, the icon of federally protected endangered species. The flock had grown from 16 birds in 1941 to 270 birds in the fall of 2009. However, last winter seven adults and 16 chicks died, totaling 23 birds and 8.5 percent of the flock. This is rivaled only by the 1990/1991 winter when 11 birds out of 146, or 7.5 percent of the flock died.

Most of the birds from this past winter were believed to have died from a lack of suitable protein and fat in their diet as well as from stress associated with daily flights to sources of fresh drinking water. Stressed and emaciated birds are less likely to have reproductive success. Thus the toll from this hard winter is yet to be fully realized.

The bays and estuaries that are the winter home of the crane are being hard hit by human water management decisions. In both 1990/1991 and 2008/2009, Texas was experiencing a drought and the flows in the Guadalupe and San Antonio rivers that feed San Antonio Bay and adjacent bays were very low — arguably due in part to our abuse of these river systems. Less fresh water reached the bays and estuaries upon which the cranes depend than can be explained simply by the drought. Our water withdrawals further lessened those flows and magnified the crisis.

Lower flows have a direct effect upon the natural productivity of the bays and estuaries. Species such as blue crab spend much of their lives moving from one portion of the estuary to another, in large part following or seeking a preferred salinity level. Except during spawning, when the female migrates to saltier water, the ideal salinity for the blue crabs is less than 15 parts per thousand (ppt).

Salinity levels in the whooping crane wintering grounds were high this year. An April 7, 2009, report revealed measurements at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge of 29 ppt at the refuge boat ramp and 39 ppt in the adjacent marsh. The Gulf of Mexico typically is 32 ppt whereas the estuary is usually much lower.

It is also clear that the marshes typically used by the cranes were devoid of blue crabs. In good years, crabs make up 85 percent of the whooping crane diet. Yet in January through

April of this year, field surveys showed that there were alarmingly few blue crabs in these marshes. There is a strong correlation between the increased salinity and the absence of blue crabs as well as between the absence of blue crabs and the cranes dying of malnutrition.

On the basis of these relationships, it is important to understand the extent to which the human use of the Guadalupe and San Antonio river water increased the salinity in the bays and estuaries, thereby reducing the number of blue crabs and ultimately causing the cranes to be weakened or to die of malnutrition. Computer modeling indicates that human uses of fresh river water have worsened this salinity problem over that which would have occurred naturally in 1990 and in 2008. Additionally, proposed future uses of these rivers promise to further reduce these inflows, leading to even greater reductions in blue crab production and further increases in whooping crane mortality.

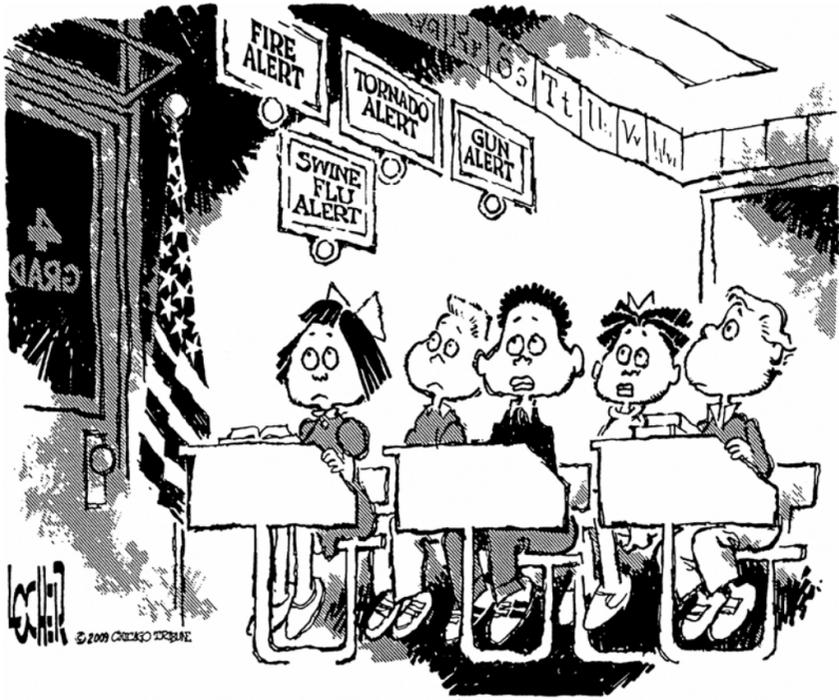
If the scenario described above is correct, then under the terms of the Endangered Species Act, the deaths of the cranes this past winter could be considered a “take.” A “take” is prohibited by the terms of the Endangered Species Act. In other words, human usage of water from the Guadalupe and San Antonio river systems may be seen as violating the Endangered Species Act. This bad situation will only be worsened if more water is removed from the already overdrafted river system.

Groups are fighting to obtain water rights for the bays and estuaries, but virtually no water is currently dedicated to that purpose. The San Marcos River Foundation filed a permit application to set aside water for San Antonio Bay — water that could have been used to support the crane — but that request was denied by the state. The planning process put in motion by the Texas Legislature is moving at a snail’s pace.

To date, reason and persuasion have fallen on deaf ears. The bottom line is that the policies of the state of Texas and of those authorities that are managing the Guadalupe and San Antonio rivers are killing the whooping cranes. And that is simply not acceptable and must stop.

*Sass is the Harry C. and Olga K. Wiess Professor of Natural Sciences emeritus at Rice University. Blackburn is an environmental attorney for Texans for a Sound Energy Policy Alliance.*

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# An upside to the downturn: better customer service



**FROMA HARROP** says now that companies are begging for business, she is seeing a new attitude and greater emphasis placed on her satisfaction.

**A**S tornadoes, thunder and lightning rampaged across the Heartland last week, the crowds piled up at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport. Every bar stool had someone on it, and restaurant lines stretched down the corridors.

This was a bizarre world, where the airport workers kept arriving and leaving, and only the travelers stayed put. And whether you were going to London or Caracas, Las Vegas or Columbus, you knew you weren’t going to get there anytime soon.

Your writer was among the agitated masses, but listen to what happened next. Upon finally boarding the United Airlines aircraft, she was surprised to come upon a spiffy-clean cabin.

She then heard a passenger remark to the

head flight attendant, “You must be as tired as we are,” and him respond, “We don’t get tired.”

Service was crisp. The attendants offered extra rounds of water and lowered the lights to soften our edges.

Even though the birds were already singing when the flight, scheduled to arrive the night before, landed, we felt cared for under difficult circumstances — and thanked our hosts.

That’s what good service can do for you. Most reasonable consumers can tolerate a cold cup of coffee or a missing part when the seller acknowledges the problem and, where possible, fixes it. What really fries them is bad or indifferent service, even if the product is good.

With a hard economy thinning the supply of ready consumers, shouldn’t we expect busi-

nesses to do more to keep them happy?

Yes, says Lopo Rego, a marketing expert at the University of Iowa, who has studied customer service in strong and weak economies.

During the boom of the late 1990s, he observed that the quality of customer service had slipped badly. The tight labor market had drained the pool of good workers at the wages that stores and fast-food restaurants were paying.

Businesses that hired lazy, careless and rude staff found that offended consumers were quickly replaced.

“There was almost a surplus of demand for no matter what services or goods you were selling,” Rego told me. “People kept coming in the door.”

Now businesses are begging for customers, and Rego is predicting a whole new attitude: “I would expect customer service to go up in the current economy because the surplus of demand has disappeared.”

Airlines may be a special case, though. Their customer service has followed a downward trend over the last five to seven years, according to Rego. “But our expectations have been reduced to the point that this is what we expect,” he says. “People know there will be no food and they’ll get charged for every little thing.”

Thus, he doesn’t see customer service on airlines improving dramatically even in this recession. Service will more likely plateau at current levels.

Perhaps it was my surprise at finding good airline service in an especially tough situation that enhanced the favorable impression. And even in this era of lowered expectations, there are limits to forbearance.

A recent Delta Air Lines flight made news when it held passengers on the tarmac in Columbia, S.C., for five hours without food or water. The bathrooms turned nasty, and people got sick.

Because rough weather had forced the diversion of their plane, flying from the Caribbean to Atlanta, most passengers would have gotten over arriving 13 hours late. But they will not forget the part of the awful experience that was under the airline’s control.

In my community, merchants who cultivated loyal customers are still getting what business there is. Many of the others have closed, leading me to note one bright spot in this economic downturn: more service with a smile.

*Harrop is a syndicated columnist based in Providence, R.I. She can be e-mailed at fharrop@projo.com.*