

Invited Commentary

The Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill Response: A Blueprint of Disaster for Canadian Wildlife

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On April 20, 2010 the oil drilling platform called Deepwater Horizon experienced an explosion that resulted in its well-head releasing, unrestricted, huge amounts of oil and natural gas into the Gulf of Mexico (GOM). As of June 30th, the U.S. government had **estimated** that up to 117.6 million gallons or 2.8 million barrels had been released into the GOM. Although some was collected or burnt off, there was still disastrous amounts of oil and gas gushing out and huge amounts of chemical dispersants being dumped into the GOM. Studies based on the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 show that the environmental damage caused by the oil from the Deepwater platform will be felt for many decades to come and by many generations of people who depend on fish, crustaceans and other wildlife for their livelihood. The laws and regulations passed by the U.S. Federal government places the responsibility straight onto BP which in turn will determine how well this disaster ends.

I am no expert in law but from what I have read, the polluting company has the legal responsibility and authority to organize the clean-up efforts and to hire whomever they want to perform this obligation. However, the government has the right to step in and take over if it deems it necessary and this is true for both Canada and the United States. Logically this would not make sense. Why would a company that accidentally, intentionally or unintentionally creates an environmental disaster want to spend huge amounts of money on cleaning it up? Why would they want to report to the governmental agencies involved or the local residents affected by their mistake, or to the media that millions of gallons of oil and gas have gushed out into the gulf and that hundreds if not thousands of animals have died or could die?



Housing for oiled birds

How the response to an environmental disaster is organized and who controls the clean-up efforts must be changed. Previous environmental disasters have shown that companies will make big promises to clean up the environment and take care of affected wildlife yet never follow-up on their “good” intentions. The GOM oil spill has clearly exposed the fact that BP has on several occasions lied, distorted or withheld the truth about the spill from the very first day it occurred. Months later, I have yet to see the true number of gallons that have been spilled as most numbers are only estimates. When looking at the wildlife being affected by the oil spill, BP has gone so far as withholding or preventing information from getting out to the public by stopping anyone from going out into the marshlands or open water to take pictures or video of animals covered in oil struggling and fighting for their lives. OERS is working on publishing some preliminary oil spill data that shows that even though the GOM oil spill is over 5 times the size of the Exxon Valdez spill, which caused the death of



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35,000 seabirds, the authorities and BP in the GOM have only found approximately 3,000 dead birds. This is not what has been published in the scientific literature or what would be expected from an oil spill the size of the one in the GOM.

So how will the oil companies or the Canadian government respond if there is an oil spill somewhere along Canada's coastline? Will it be a repeat of the GOM oil spill? Is anyone going to call on OERS or other non government organizations to help clean and rehabilitate the oiled wildlife? I was recently interviewed on CBC in response to the release of the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board's plans in response to an oil spill off of Newfoundland's coast. In a disturbing trend, several areas of the plans had been blacked out to preserve the proprietorship of certain information. A few days later, they publicly announced that doing so had been a mistake and that the plans would be re-issued without any blacked out parts. Interestingly, the blacked out areas included details such as who would manage a major oil spill response and models detailing where the oil might spread. When looking at oiled wildlife, the Canadian authorities will issue permits to individuals or organizations whom they deem to be competent to handle and rehabilitating wildlife trapped in oil spills. But this may not be as promising as it sounds since the Canadian Wildlife Service strongly believes the following;

"However there are vast expanses of Canada's coastlines where the waters are generally cold or frigid and the species generally affected do not respond well to cleaning and rehabilitation. In these cases the most humane thing treatment is often to euthanise affected birds."

So it would seem like that any response to save oiled wildlife here in Canada would face the same hurdles that was seen down in the GOM. In the GOM, all of the cleaning and rehabilitation of oiled wildlife was done by non government organizations that were chosen and hired by BP. As OERS Director of Operations, I sent emails and

filled out numerous online forms to BP and federal and state authorities offering the services of our OERS teams to assist them with the capture and rehabilitation of wildlife. Each time I received placating responses saying that no one can help unless they had been properly trained to deal with the potential dangers of working with crude oil. The course to make someone safe from picking up or dealing with oiled objects or wildlife was only 2 days long. Coincidentally, this is the same 2 day course that some OERS people took in California.

I would hope that our government officials and Canadian oil companies would look at all of the problems, bad decisions and mistakes made by both BP and the U.S. government during the GOM oil spill and modify present oil spill plans accordingly. These plans should also include Canadian non government organizations like OERS who have the training and experience in handling and rehabilitating wildlife and could dramatically assist during oil spill response efforts. However, all of my previous experience dealing with government officials at all levels leads me to believe that Canadian wildlife will not have a better chance than the wildlife that was trapped in the GOM.

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OERS Volunteer bathing soiled bird

