

# The impacts of BP's oil spill still linger in the Southeast – and Monterey County.

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Water is ubiquitous in southern Louisiana. The air itself is wet, thick with palpable humidity. Highways run inches above swamps; bayous descend into channels that flow into the Gulf of Mexico. On the GPS, I watch the land break off and disappear into the water like ice cubes melting in a glass.

Like most people, my first instinct was to recoil from images of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. But I'd spent last summer traveling the United States on a biodiesel-powered road trip, searching for signs of hope that our country would move away from our dependence on fossil fuels. Now I found myself wondering how the BP oil spill would affect the Monterey Bay.

I wasn't the only one entertaining such questions. In early May, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger announced that he no longer supported expanded offshore drilling near Santa Barbara. By late July, U.S. Reps. Sam Farr and John Garamendi were calling for a complete halt to new oil drilling leases off the West Coast. In his newsletter, Farr said the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill "foreshadowed the events that have wreaked havoc off the Gulf of Mexico."

He also pointed out something that Peninsula residents know well: Our economies depend on the ocean. According to Farr, tourism and fishing generate \$32 billion each year and employ almost 600,000 people along the West Coast.

Despite our distance, California and Louisiana share a striking similarity: a love for and dependence on the water. Perhaps this parallel explains why so many California natives have assisted in researching and cleaning up the spill.

From Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute scientists studying underwater oil plumes to Monterey Institute of International Studies graduates working at wildlife rescue centers, Monterey has sent many of its own to the Gulf.

Three weeks of summer remained before I returned to my instructor duties at MIIS. With a GPS and a manic driving schedule, I, too, headed to the Gulf Coast – to face the spill and try to understand what it means for all of us.

Like Monterey, Grand Isle is a vacation town. But during my visit in late August, I saw more "For Sale" signs lining the street than tar balls on the beach. Like the oil, journalists and tourists have vanished from view, leaving abandoned storefronts and closed seafood restaurants in their wake. Grand Isle, a no-stoplight town, is today occupied by military Humvees with "Disaster Relief" stenciled on the side.

Flimsy orange fencing forms a barrier between the murky ocean and bulldozer-scrubbed beach: "Authorized Personnel Only." There is no one in sight to enforce the ban except an occasional low-flying helicopter that ignores me. Pelicans perch on the distant rocks; a school of dolphins dips and dives. On the horizon, an oil rig provides the sole eerie reminder of what has occurred here.

In the nearby town of Chauvin (population 3,229), fishermen line the edges of the bayou. The waterways have officially re-opened. Children swim and play tag in the water. Further down the bayou, an elderly couple sits in lawn chairs, their wrinkles glistening in the sun.

“We navigate everything from the bayou,” says Rebecca Templeton, environmental outreach coordinator for Bayou Grace Community Services. “We might say, ‘I’m going up the bayou,’ which means, ‘I’m going towards New Orleans.’ Or, ‘I’m going down the bayou,’ which means, ‘I’m going towards the Gulf of Mexico.’”

The bayou is also a symbol of the region’s livelihood. Commercial fishing in the Gulf produces 1.29 billion pounds of fish and shellfish valued at \$659 million annually, according to a recent Oxfam America policy report. Tourists, many of whom come to participate in recreational fishing, invest more than \$100 billion per year in the region, the report adds.

Ordinarily, the bayou’s two major industries – oil and natural gas extraction, and fishing – share an amicable, if tense, relationship. Much of the region’s devastation following Hurricanes Katrina (in 2005) and Rita (in 2008) can be attributed to industrial impacts.

“Hurricanes are a devastating force, but the impacts that we are experiencing are not natural,” Templeton says. “It’s due to the damming and levying of the Mississippi River, and also impacts from the oil and gas industry through the dredging of canals that brought saltwater intrusion into the environment and led to the degradation of our coastal protections.”

Yet, she adds, “many people are hesitant to be critical of BP or the oil companies in our communities because livelihoods are tied to it.”

Chauvin and the entire Gulf Coast region are experiencing a classic Catch-22: One sector of the economy depends upon oil and natural gas; another’s very existence is threatened by it.

With the Aug. 11 announcement by federal officials that 75 percent of the oil from the Deepwater Horizon disaster had been contained, the tide seemed to be turning. Many fishermen, some of whom rely upon subsistence fishing to help feed their families, returned to the bayous. But barely a week later, the University of South Florida released a study indicating at least 53 million of 172 million gallons – more than 30 percent – remain in the water, while a Georgia Sea Grant study estimates 70-79 percent of the oil remains.

One hundred and one Gulf community organizations, including Bayou Grace, addressed the poor information flow in a June 10 joint statement regarding the oil spill. “It is understandable that BP would try to minimize their liability by withholding incriminating information,” they stated. “It is not understandable that federal agencies would allow BP to hide incriminating information.”

MBARI oceanographer John Ryan offers a more benign explanation: poor interpretation of scientific data. Ryan was involved in MBARI’s May release of an autonomous underwater vehicle, a high-tech robotic submersible able to reach depths of 5,000 feet and take samples from subsurface oil plumes, into the Gulf of Mexico.

“This is new to everybody,” Ryan says. “We’ve had spills – but at the surface. This has put all marine researchers at a new learning curve.”

Ryan’s colleague Christopher Reddy, a Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute marine chemist who helped confirm the Gulf subsurface oil plume, warns against politicizing the discrepancy. “Science is more like a jigsaw puzzle,” he wrote for CNN. “Each piece is added. Occasionally, a wrong piece may be placed, but eventually science will correct it.”

The uncertainty facing scientists parallels the uncertainty facing Gulf communities, but they need clear data *now*.

“When we’re being told that recreational fishing is now open in our waters, I think people want to trust that,” Templeton says. “But I am hearing some people in the community wondering aloud, ‘Are they opening the waterways too early without really knowing if it’s safe or not?’”

Four months after the oil spill began, the International Bird Rescue Research Center has documented 7,552 birds, 1,078 turtles, 90 mammals (including dolphins) and two affected reptiles.

But Allison Ford, a recent MIIS graduate and IBRRC spill response team member, qualifies the statistics: “The official numbers reflect the known impact on animals that have been tracked, caught or found dead. In no way do these numbers reflect the actual impact of the spill on the ecology of the Gulf or all of its wildlife.”

At the Hammond Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, an hour north of New Orleans, I watch one of these numbers come to life as rescue workers wash a single pelican. The handlers’ faces are concealed by thick goggles, their hands dwarfed by rubber gloves, their bodies draped in bright yellow aprons. The soap of choice, Dawn, forms rows of blue bottles on a nearby shelf.

According to Jay Holcomb, facility manager and executive director of IBRRC, oil destroys the feathers’ natural waterproofing and insulation. Left in the water oiled, birds get hypothermia and ultimately perish. “When a bird comes in that is oiled, we make two assumptions: that it’s probably dehydrated or is becoming dehydrated, and it may be hypothermic,” he says.

Though the handlers appear gruff with the pelican, Holcomb assures the assembled journalists that it is being treated gently. The clean-up crew has to keep the animal under control and work as quickly as possible to minimize handling because the animals must stay wild. “We don’t want them to get habituated to people,” he says.

A grim optimism has set in at the center, where workers expect a 50-80 percent survival rate for the birds. Two to three months ago, Holcomb says, 40-60 oiled birds came in each day. Recently, that number has declined to 6-10 birds per day. The weekend after my visit, nearly 100 healthy and clean birds were released in the states where they were found, tagged with a metal band so they can be tracked for the rest of their lives.

The slowdown has allowed Ford some much-needed time off from Hammond. “I’ve been here two months, working 12 – to 14-hour days nonstop,” she says. “I’ve had maybe five days off, and I’m at the point of exhaustion.” Still, she’s bracing for the upcoming migratory season: “Many birds may be headed to oiled areas. Numbers have tapered off from the initial spill, but we don’t know if there will be a second wave.”

BP’s use of the dispersant Corexit, a banned substance in Europe, is another area of concern. “The Gulf is accustomed to some amount of oil in its ecosystem, [but] this amount is unprecedented,” Ford says. “The dispersants are a totally foreign chemical, and we don’t know how it will impact the Gulf.”

Scientists don’t know, either. “Some of the substances in Corexit are known to be carcinogenic, but exactly how those dispersants, applied down deep and in the shallows by airplane, will affect marine life and ultimately people – that’s such a specialized question, and no one in this marine response community has the background to answer it,” Ryan says. “Ideally, we would have known the answer before we used it.”

Perhaps the greatest unknown is the long-term impact of the spill. “The most toxic components of crude oil are the least likely to be naturally degraded and the last to disintegrate,” Ryan says. “Whatever environment they reach, the impacts will be amplified due to this partitioning.”

Ford, for her part, has committed to staying in the region for as long as oiled birds continue arriving at the center.

Sitting on a stoop in New Orleans' Mid-City district, I talk with Anne Rolfes, founding director of the environmental justice organization Louisiana Bucket Brigade. Mid-City represents a post-Katrina success story: Though the area was completely underwater in August 2005, the population has returned to more than 90 percent of its pre-Katrina level.

Neighbors walk by holding cups of coffee and greeting one another. Despite being a big city, New Orleans remains true to old-time traditions like saying hello to strangers on the street. Bumper stickers and banners display an atypical civic pride: "American by Birth, Cajun by the Grace of God." With the Saints' Super Bowl victory, it seemed New Orleans was on its way to full recovery.

And then this.

Nearly everyone I speak to in Louisiana refers to Katrina when speaking of the oil spill. Rolfes is no exception.

"You wouldn't know unless you *know* that this place was under water," she says. "Katrina is over, and you can't go to any sort of map to see where people died or where all the houses were destroyed."

The city's vulnerability to disaster underscores the value of Ushahidi, a crowd-sourcing platform that allows anyone to report incidents related to the oil spill via text, e-mail, phone, or Internet ([www.ushahidi.com](http://www.ushahidi.com)). Originally used in Kenya to document instances of election fraud, "ushahidi" means "testimony" in Swahili. In 2005 the technology was not available to document Katrina, but it now allows the public to monitor the effects of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. Reported incidents are investigated, verified and added as dots of testimony on the Oil Spill Crisis Map.

According to Rolfes, the map has two main purposes: documenting the scope of the disaster and directing crisis response. Tracking the disaster's impacts has become particularly important as BP attempts to minimize its liability. As someone who has worked with Nigerian communities dealing with the impacts of that country's oil industry, Rolfes is familiar with the typical corporate response.

"In Nigeria, it's a lot worse, but what is true is that they'll operate at the lowest common denominator," she says. "For example, in Nigeria, they can have a huge flare for 50 years and they can have oil spew on fertile farm land with no penalty. Here, they can't get away with having a huge flare burn for 50 years, but they can get away with dumping oil into a bayou for decades. So whatever the lowest common denominator is, they'll operate there."

In a climate of limited information and shallow reporting by mainstream media, citizen journalism and community self-monitoring have taken on new levels of importance. The Louisiana Bucket Brigade empowers people to monitor their neighborhoods' air quality using simple technologies.

According to Rolfes, the 10 largest refineries in Louisiana average 10 accidents per week. Accordingly, "a big part of what we do is empower people to monitor their environments," she says. "This map is another step in that process; it's documentation."

The Louisiana Bucket Brigade has recently been holding numerous trainings on using the Oil Spill Crisis Map in Gulf communities, including Chauvin. In places so reliant upon the oil industry, the map offers anonymity.

“I remember being introduced to what the Bucket Brigade was doing,” Templeton says, “and it seemed like a really great way to document impacts that they may be seeing or experiencing without having to be fearful of who’s going to find out.”

The neighborhoods lost to Katrina may be forgotten with generational memory, but the online permanence of the map ensures that at least some of the oil spill’s impacts will remain permanently on record.

In New Orleans, a cynicism has set in – but it is not a humorless or uniform reaction. On the cover of the *New Orleans Levee* (think *The Onion*), an oiled pelican is shown next to a sparkling clean bird. The caption reads, “BP’s Photoshop experts clean up entire region.”

A bartender near Bourbon Street peddles whiskey shots (of which she partakes) before following a belligerent drunk into the streets: “I’m watching you buddy! I’ll call whatever bar you go into and tell ’em not to serve you. You’re done for the night!”

She has equally sharp words for outsiders who are talking about boycotts: “We’ve got enough people working for the oil companies around here that we know what’s really going on. But boycotting BP and not eating the seafood doesn’t hurt BP, only the people who live and work here.”

With the passing of Katrina’s five-year anniversary, Bourbon Street and the French Quarter bustle as they always have. A bearded shopkeeper who left Portland for New Orleans 15 years ago tells of how he rebuilt his three storefronts after the hurricane in order to restore a sense of normalcy to local residents, particularly his employees – though he has yet to start rebuilding his own home.

Outside, a drizzling rain falls, the remnants of another tropical storm. The Gulf, at once the region’s lifeblood and potential doom, sends constant reminders of its power. The site of the nation’s largest natural disaster and now the country’s worst ecological catastrophe remains embroiled in unknowns.

Whereas Katrina brought visible calamity, the Deepwater Horizon accident has wrought largely invisible consequences. As oil stops washing ashore, media images of President Obama swimming in the Gulf with his daughter segue to Hollywood scandals.

But like much of the oil, the biggest questions facing the Gulf linger.

“On one hand, the ocean truly is vast. Maybe it did somehow absorb all that oil,” one Chauvin resident mused. “Then again, that’s an awful lot of oil to just... disappear.”

Back in Monterey, spectacular bay views begin to assuage my memories of the Gulf’s murky beaches and oil-sludged rocks. But my relief could be misguided. So long as oil drilling persists in southern California, the Monterey Bay remains at risk like the Gulf of Mexico.

Monterey’s Sea Otter Project reports that a single oil spill could wipe out the entire California sea otter population. “Sea otter folks live in fear of an oil spill because it’s so hard to capture and treat oiled otters,” Ford, who once worked with the group, says. “It’s far better to avoid the scenario through prevention.”

We are all consumers of oil, so the Gulf’s Catch-22 remains our own. Is it possible to simultaneously prevent ecological destruction and maintain our current way of life?