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Sharing information and knowledge for the benefit of native wildlife

The Gulf Oil Spill – Part II

On April 20, 2010, an event occurred that rivaled 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina when you consider the damage it has done to the United States. The event was the explosion and sinking of the oil platform called DEEPWATER HORIZON. Eleven workers were killed and another 17, injured. On April 22nd the well sunk. It continued spewing oil into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Louisiana which spread to the shores of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida and Texas.

British Petroleum has accepted the responsibility for the damage done by the spill. President Obama laid the blame for the spill and damage at the feet of BP and convinced BP to put aside a Trust Fund of \$20 billion dollars to help pay compensation to workers, businesses, the ecology and environment (including damage to the marsh, mangrove, wetlands and beaches), and local and migrating wildlife. Damage to the fishing, tourism, and oil industries as well as the environment cannot be estimated at this time. This fund will be administered by Kenneth Feinberg, who also handled the funds for 9/11. Administrators of the BP funds began, only recently, to accept applications that being late August.

What caused the explosion is still being examined. One theory states that part of the problem of the oil dispersal may have been caused by a non functioning safety valve that management knew about but did not try to repair. Many organizations are holding hearings in attempts to find the exact cause of the oil spill and its aftermath. Continued deep sea drilling has been stopped for six months. It is expected that new regulations will be put into effect to prevent future disasters such as this one.

For three months BP made several attempts to stop the oil from flowing and to remove the oil as soon as possible. Local fishermen were hired to help with containment and removal of oil from the surface of the water. BP used dispersants to break the oil into smaller pieces so they could more easily be removed. Bumpers, anchored barriers, and sand filled barriers were placed around the shore and around the barrier islands to help stop the oil before it entered the wetlands. While reports vary, around 53,000 barrels of oil per day were released into the Gulf causing extensive damage to the environment. In spite of the attempts to contain the oil, the first tar balls began to appear on the beaches around Grand Isle on July 5th. They continued to spread to other beaches in nearby states.

Finally, on July 15th the oil stopped flowing. The well was plugged with a special cap. This required careful work to lower and then attach the cap to the well. To further plug the well, heavy mud and concrete were forced down the well. However, work is still being done on two rescue wells which will make the plugged well much safer. Work also continued to remove the oil and to keep it from spreading to the shore and the wetlands. This was not completely successful. Pictures of the area show the oil on the fringes of the wetlands, mangroves and other areas. These photos show that the environmental damage is continuing. Many scientists believe that the greatest danger in the Gulf is not only the loss of animals, but the damage done to the fragile ecosystems in the area. Included in the area threatened by the oil are eight national parks with more than forty wildlife species at risk including pelicans, gulls, spoonbills, egrets, terns, and herons.

In a study of the area, the government and BP stated that most of the oil has been removed or has evaporated using the number 75% removed. However, scientists disagree. They feel that about 50-75% of the oil is still there, under the water. Scientists have found large plumes of oil under the surface of the water which cannot be seen from the surface. These plumes are as large as 10 miles long, 3 miles wide and 300 feet thick. In fact, on Aug. 19th a plume of oil was found to be 22 miles long. How much damage to the marine animals and the environment these plumes will cause is not known nor is how long the plumes will continue to be a threat. Besides the damage done by the oil, scientists are also watching the side effects of the chemical dispersants used since not much is known about the long term effects of some of the dispersants.

As of August 13th, 4,768 dead animals have been collected including 4,080 birds, 525 sea turtles, 72 dolphins and other mammals and 1 reptile. This is in spite of the efforts of volunteer and professionals who are washing and otherwise caring for animals that have come in touch with the oil. These animals are then released back into the wild often at some distance from the spill. Pelicans seem to be one of the species most affected. Part of the reason is because they hunt by diving and they do not see the oil as a barrier. In addition, there are a lot of pelicans that live on the barrier islands. One of the sad but true statements I found was that the Louisiana state bird, the pelican, is seen everywhere covered with crude oil.

Everyday, there are positive changes happening in the Gulf. Some plusses are

- Oil is not flowing from the well.
- Progress is being made in permanently closing the well.
- Much of the surface oil has been removed.
- Shrimpers are beginning to collect shrimp which are safe for human use.
- Other fish, and clams, etc are being tested and deemed safe
- Birds and marine animals are being collected, cleaned and returned to the wild. This is especially important since many of the animals are on the endangered and threatened lists. This includes sperm whales, manatees, several species of sea turtles and a number of bird species.
- The methods used to clean, care for, and release oil soaked animals have improved greatly which means that more are saved for a lower cost. (Dawn Dishwashing Detergent is still the weapon of choice to remove the oil.)
- The discovery of a new microbe that will eat oil may provide new ways to improve how we approach future spills.
- Swimming was opened in the Gulf in Alabama on Aug. 16th and other states followed suit soon after.
- Fishing has been opened in most areas.
- Tourism is improving in many areas

Unfortunately, there are still many problems that will need to be addressed. These include:

- Damage to the wildlife including marine animals (many species are already endangered) such as sea turtles, manatees, whales and dolphins.
- Improve the availability and safety of Gulf shrimp, crustaceans, mollusks and fish.
- Study the effects of oil plumes and dispersants in the Gulf on the animals and environment
- Undo the damage done to the wetlands, barrier islands, marshes and beaches.
- Study the effects on migratory birds and mammals when migration to the south begins soon.
- Examine the long term damage to the ocean floor.
- Study the damage done to vegetation on land and under water
- Fraud is beginning to appear in some applications for relief funds.

While things are looking up in the Gulf, the area still faces many possible problems including some that will need long term study.

The information in this article came largely from the following sources on the internet

THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

THE NEW YORK TIMES

WIKIPEDIA

and from the magazine

NATIONAL WIDELIFE, August. 2010

The amount of material on the internet is incredible. One thing to watch when assembling information is how much of the material is generated by BP.

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