All The Fish Are Dead

The recent BP oil spill disaster shows how the world's overdependence on fossil fuel could create many problems for fishing communities

On 20 April 2010, when the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig of BP exploded, causing one of the largest oil spills in history, many hoped the disaster would smarten the United States administration. Whether that will happen remains to be seen. But what is clear is that the BP disaster has made the US fishing communities' worst nightmares come true.

Years of work on a range of issues—from rebuilding the fragile habitats of mangroves to employing turtle excluder devices to avoid turtle bycatch in the shrimp fishery—seem to have gone down the drain with that one explosion. Fishing has all but halted for the Gulf of Mexico's shrimpers, crabbers and oystermen.

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Heartbreaking images of oil-drenched marine animals have only reinforced the tragedy of the oil spill. Toxic dispersants intended to break the oil up into smaller pieces have been applied to the Gulf waters. Hugh Kaufman, a scientist at the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) accuses the Obama administration—including his own agency, the EPA—of being "sock-puppets for BP in the cover-up" over the true amount of oil that has been spilt and the toxic effects of the dispersants.

According to Kaufman, dispersants have saved BP millions or more by hiding the true amount of oil spilt. Nearly 2 mn gallons of toxic Corexit have been used since the spill started. Despite the approval of the use of Corexit as an oil dispersant, Kaufman is amongst many experts concerned about its extreme toxicity and danger.

Reports of illness amongst clean-up workers are already coming in. As of 22 July 2010, the State of Alabama alone reported over 106 people admitted to local emergency rooms and clinics with ailments thought to be related to the oil spill. According to the Alabama Department of Public Health, officials are conducting surveillance across the State to monitor effects related to the spill at more than 20 sites in Mobile and Baldwin counties.

In the last hours of finalizing the 1996 reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act—the US law that governs fisheries—an amendment that would have required impacts of non-fishing issues to be considered by fisheries managers was struck down. Concerned that their activities might now come under the microscope of fisheries regulators, non-fishing interests such as clear-cutting, chemical manufacturing and oil companies lobbied to kill the amendment. Had that amendment been passed, perhaps disasters such as the BP oil spill could have been prevented.

Offshore drilling

Although President Obama has said he has no plans to allow any offshore drilling north of New Jersey, Angela Sanfilippo, President of the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association (GFWA), is not taking any chances. She wants to ensure long-term protection for the ocean

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so nothing like the BP disaster can happen again.

"Today, more than ever, GFWA wants to see fishing grounds protected until the end of time. Even with all the hard work we put in through the 1980s, protecting Georges Bank, we still depend on whoever is in charge," says Sanfilippo.

The BP oil spill may now be on everyone's mind, but this is not the first—nor last—disaster to threaten marine and human life. Over the last decade, spills of various degrees have impacted human and wildlife in the northeast US. Nine million lobsters were covered in oil when the barge *North Cape* ran aground in 1996, carrying home heating oil. Over 800,000 gallons of oil spilled off the coast of Rhode Island, killing millions of lobsters and about one million pounds of clams, oysters and other crustaceans. Lobstering in the area was closed for five months. According to the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA), a US$8 mn settlement was finally reached in 2000, to aid in recovery of the region's ecosystem, including stocking the area with 1.2 mn female lobsters.

The *M/V World Prodigy* spilled over 250,000 gallons of home heating oil off Newport, Rhode Island, on 23 June 1989—only months after the *Exxon Valdez* spilled 11 mn gallons of oil into the Prince William Sound in Alaska on 24 March 1989. The *Prodigy* spill covered approximately 120 sq miles during critical spawning periods for many species and, according to NOAA, killed eggs and larvae of fish and shellfish. The incident led to the closure of the fishing ground. A US$567,000 settlement was reached to restore the natural resources of the area.

On 7 December 2004, the *M/V Selendang Ayu* lost power near Unalaska Island, one of the islands making up the Aleutian chain, in the Bering Sea. The vessel, carrying 424,000 gallons of intermediate fuel oil (IFO 380) and 18,000 gallons of marine diesel, went aground, breaking in two and spilling at least 40,000 gallons of oil. According to NOAA, many species of fish, marine mammals and seabirds make the waters of Unalaska their home, thus increasing their vulnerability following the spill. Some of these species, such as the Steller sea lion, are endangered, and fishing activities in the region have been severely curtailed in recent years to assist in the Steller's recovery.

On 27 April 2003, *Bouchard Barge 120* ruptured its hull, spilling over 90,000 gallons of oil into Buzzards Bay, off the coast of Massachusetts. In addition to many endangered or threatened birds, diamond back terrapin, and grey and harbour seals, US Fish and Wildlife listed the following commercially valuable species as "resources at risk" due to the spill: American lobster, horseshoe crab, American oyster, hard-shelled clam or quahog, soft-shelled clam, American shad, striped bass and winter flounder. In its most recent figures, US Fish and Wildlife estimates over 6,000 oil spills reported in 2000, in the northeast US alone. Globally, over 14,000 oil spills are reported each year.

From oil spills and extreme weather episodes to mercury in fish and rising sea levels, fishing communities find themselves in the eye of the fossil fuel hurricane. The global dependence on fossil fuel could be contributing

CHUCK COOK/GREENPEACE

A scene from the tiny community of Grand Isle on the Louisiana gulf coast near the site of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill

to the many challenges facing fishing communities and the recovery of marine species around the world. Despite the substantial impact on the marine environment and fishing economies, little more than disaster preparation is done to protect the fish or the coastal communities from events resulting from the continued use of fossil fuels such as oil, coal and natural gas.

According to Jim Vallette, of Southwest Harbour, Maine, a former research director for the Institute for Policy Studies' Sustainable Energy and Economies Network, despite calls for transitioning to renewable energy sources, the US Energy Information Administration projects that US consumption of oil, gas and coal will increase over the next 20 years.

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To accommodate this growth, Vallette, who has spent many hours researching the ecological and economic impact of global oil and gas exploration, predicts that new activities involving oil and gas exploration will continue to be focused further offshore. Current efforts are already under way in Nigeria, Brazil, Nova Scotia, the Gulf of Mexico, Indonesia, West Africa, the Caspian Sea, and New England.

"The total cost to the marine environment and the fishing communities is enormous. Impacts from seismic testing, pollution from drilling muds, oil spills and fugitive emissions, to name a few, could be undermining efforts under way to protect marine ecosystems," says Vallette. "Fish, whales and other animals migrate throughout the ocean and this trend to move oil and gas terminals out of sight and offshore should be a concern to fishing communities everywhere."

For more

www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAYLqPORaYU
The Fishermen's Revolt

www.scomas.com/caring-fishermen.cfm
Help Clean Up the Gulf Oil Spill and Support Local Salmon Fishermen

deepwaterhorizon.noaa.gov
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