

A WAY OF LIFE AT RISK

HOW THE BP OIL SPILL HAS THREATENED THE CULTURE, ECONOMY, AND ECOSYSTEM OF LOUISIANA COASTAL COMMUNITIES

On April 20, 2010 an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig kicked off the largest offshore oil spill in history, as nearly five million barrels of oil spewed into the Gulf Coast over the course of several months. Most of that oil is still there, and will be there for years to come.

The effort to measure its impact has largely focused on the environment and the economy. As the ecosystem was devastated, so too was the economic system that relied on the vibrant natural resources of the region. The three main sectors of the economy—fishing, tourism, and oil and gas—took an immediate hit, and have been struggling to recover since.

What is less reported is how the spill dealt profound and lasting blows to the people who rely on these natural resources. As the years have worn on, the many impacts of the oil spill have taken a toll on people's livelihoods, households and families; on

their health and welfare; and on their "sense of place" and way of life that had endured for generations.

In 2014, four years after the spill, the communities are showing signs of recovery, but also of grinding despair. They report being exhausted, unwell, and disconnected from the bountiful ecosystem that sustained their livelihoods and fed their families for generations. There is an air of profound sadness for the loss of a culture and a way of life.

It may be many more years before the full impact is known and understood; it's possible that some communities and cultures may never fully recover. What is clear is that the oil spill was unique in the way it crippled a way of life in some communities on the Gulf Coast: from the ecosystem to the economy to the health and culture of the people.

//My grandson is too young to understand. He has an intense love for our way of life here. He wants to be a fisherman and a fishing guide. It is what he is in his soul, and it is his culture. How can I tell him that this may never come to pass now, now that everything he loves in the outdoors may soon be destroyed by this massive oil spill? How do we tell a generation of young people who live and breathe this bayou life that they love so much could soon be gone?//

MICHAEL ROBERTS, ASSOCIATION OF FAMILY FISHERMEN, INC.

// With hurricanes, you get the kids back in school, and get stores and businesses moving quickly—back to normal, and folks start feeling good about themselves and their community. They take pride in their work and efforts.

“There is no pride when you just see the oil gushing on TV and there’s nothing you can do and you don’t know what the future is. There is no normal or getting back to normal.” //

MICHEL CLAUDET, TERREBONNE PARISH PRESIDENT



TORN APART BY OIL

Nearly 1.7 million people live in the coastal communities in southeastern Louisiana and Mississippi. The region hosts a remarkable wealth and diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and industries. However, these states are also among the poorest in the country, and are plagued with high levels of inequality and low economic mobility. Median income in the coastal areas is well below national average.

This report focuses on the people who live in the “bayou communities” on the coastline of Louisiana. They have a unique relationship with the ecosystem, and they are the ones who have had the most intimate exposure to the impacts of the oil spill. The fishing families harvest shrimp, oysters, crabs, and saltwater and freshwater fish; for consumption or for sale, for recreation or for commercial use.

These communities are often described as exemplars of mutual aid and self-sufficiency. They feature hardworking people with diverse skills, and the ability to be creative in supporting their families. Indeed, they have been lauded for their resilience in the wake of hurricanes: engaged citizens take care of each other, and take on responsibilities that people inland would expect of government.

The oil spill has touched nearly every person in these coastal communities. In the course of the interviews¹ for this report, no one reported that the spill has had a positive impact; or that they have yet bounced back to previous levels of well-being. In particular, the fishing families experience the ordeal of *waiting* every day: for compensation for economic losses, for restoration of the land and waters, for a return to “normal.”

// There are so many families that are poor due to the oil spill. Deck hands and others who are extremely hard working just have no place to work.

“The docks are down; they are not buying or shipping. The boats are moored, they don’t know what the next season will be. The fishermen can’t take chances of going out because if there is no catch, they become deeper in debt.” //

COMMUNITY OFFICIAL

THE QUALITIES OF A “TECHNOLOGICAL” RATHER THAN A NATURAL DISASTER

A technological disaster (such as an oil spill) differs from a natural disaster (such as a hurricane), and poses different threats and challenges to the people and the environment.²

For years, the people of these coastal communities regarded themselves as hard-working individuals, and as survivors, with self-sustaining networks of community reciprocity. The oil spill up-ended this heritage of overcoming adversity together.

The oil spill differed from a natural disaster in many ways. Some of the most prominent differences included:

- **It wasn’t anticipated or predictable.** Whereas Gulf Coast communities know what to expect from a storm (and how to recover), they didn’t know what to expect from the spill. No one knew when it would stop, and to this day no one is sure what the ultimate impact will be on people or the ecosystem.
- **It was the result of human error, and someone was responsible.** Those affected often feel anger toward the people who were responsible for accidents that may have been prevented.
- **It challenged the normal community response,** and created disputes.
- **It broke the relationship between the ecosystem and the people.** These communities relied on the land and water for food, for business, for recreation; after the spill, they couldn’t rely on the natural resources, and questioned the purity of what they managed to catch or harvest.
- **It was a legal incident, and the legal process requires “victimization.”** People need to prove that they are “victims,” as most benefits come from a litigation process where someone has to be found guilty of wrongdoing.

DAMAGE TO THE INTEGRITY OF COASTAL COMMUNITIES

SEPARATION FROM THE ECOSYSTEM AND LOSS OF SENSE OF PLACE

Coastal residents perceive that the relationship between people and natural resources has been damaged by the oil spill, and that the Gulf of Mexico has changed forever. Residents do not know whether to approach the ecosystem or to stay away; whether to wait for the seafood harvests to rebound or to try to find other jobs; whether to eat the seafood they do catch or reject it when they see stunted growth; whether to teach their children to harvest or to avoid taking them out on the boats at all.

Underlying these concerns is a sense of mourning: for their ecosystem and the loss of their identity. In an interview, one fisher noted, "A piece of me died that season because harvesting oysters was more than a job. It was my love."

The broken links extend into family relationships and community ties. Fishing families usually work as a unit: preparing, fishing, cleaning, selling, doing the books. The work involves everyone, including the children. They spend time on their parents' boats from an early age, anticipating that they will one day be fishing as well.

SENSE OF POWERLESSNESS

The oil spill presented a new and enormous challenge to the coastal residents. For a culture that valued resilience and self-sufficiency, the oil spill undercut their identity. They couldn't recover by repairing a net or rebuilding a house. They couldn't call their insurance agency or turn to FEMA³ for assistance. They couldn't head back out to the waters. And they couldn't clean up the damage to the ecosystem.

As Clint Guidry of the Louisiana Shrimp Association noted, "The damage was overwhelming. There was nobody there to clean it up. It would take an army to do it."

Moreover, there was, and continues to be, no clear sense of what "normal" should or will look like. How long can the families wait for the seafood harvests to recover, if they ever do? How long can they wait for the money from the RESTORE Act⁴ or NRDA⁵ to restore ecosystem resources? Will they ever be "made whole" for their economic losses?

DISTRUST OF AUTHORITIES, FRUSTRATION WITH PROCESS

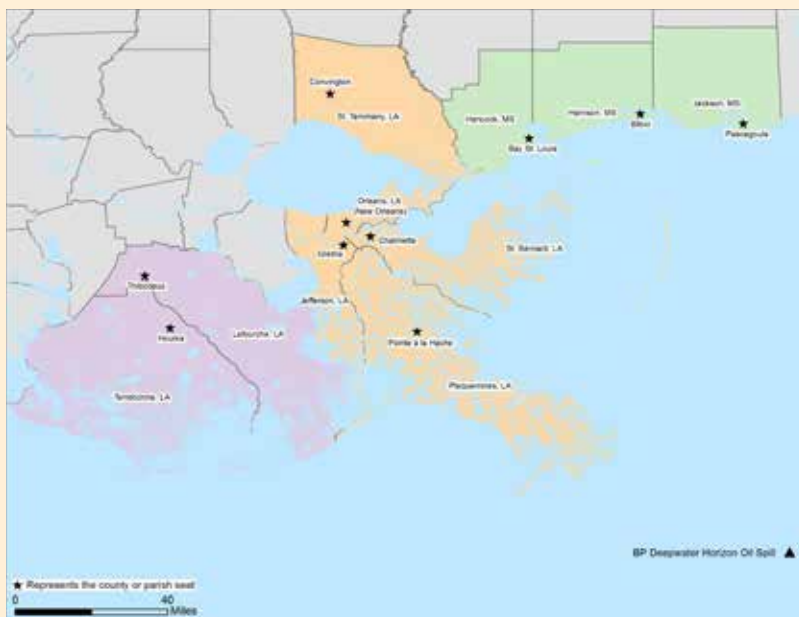
Many coastal residents have come to distrust anyone with authority in the case of the oil spill, including the companies

involved (especially BP) as well as government officials. There is widespread frustration about the difficulty, slowness, and uncertainty surrounding the claims process for businesses and individuals who suffered economic damage from the spill.

Oil company officials are particularly distrusted; people believe they don't care about those who have been hurt, nor do they portray the effects of the spill accurately. In particular, they take offense at the television commercials that laud how clean and free from oil the beaches are. Residents know how difficult it is to clean oil from beaches, marshes and water, and they feel it undercuts the reality that deep damage has been done. One fisherman in Plaquemines Parish said, "The companies refer to us as the 'little people.' They don't care or realize that they are ruining our livelihoods."

The oil spill was so massive, and its impact so profound and unclear, most people came to believe that it was vital for the government to step in and help manage the recovery and restoration process. But as various governmental agencies did step in, some people were both frustrated by and suspicious of their actions.

THE SPECIAL NATURE OF THE IMPACTED REGION: GULF COAST GEOGRAPHY, RESOURCES, ECONOMY



The map illustrates the location of the Deepwater Horizon well that exploded in 2010, and the ten communities impacted by the oil spill.

After nearly five million barrels of oil flowed into the ocean between April and July 2010, coastal areas in all five Gulf states (Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas) were contaminated, and marine and wildlife habitats were devastated.

Years later, the "oiled" communities still feel the effects of the oil that remains—sunk to the bottom, occasionally stirred up and washed ashore by storms.

The Gulf is home to three vibrant industries—fishing, tourism, oil/gas—because it has a wealth of resources, both geographic and cultural. The Louisiana coastline contains the footprint of the historic delta of the Mississippi River; as the river switched back and forth over 5,000 years, the oil and gas resources were created.

The oil released after the explosion spread to marshes on the tips of these land extensions, then moved inland to the water between the bayou land masses.



// After the oil came in, one of the things that the fishermen were talking about was the sound. The sound of the wildlife, the sound of the birds, the sounds that we take for granted because you just hear it all the time—frogs, crickets, birds. After the spill, it was silent, it was like the sound had disappeared. So people were wondering, did everything die, or did it have the sense to get out of here for a little while...

“A wetland area is just prolific with wildlife. So you just hear it, it becomes part of your whole environment. When that’s not there anymore... it’s sort of a shock to your system.” //

TRACY KUHNS, GO FISH

TRACY KUHNS AND MIKE ROBERTS OF GO FISH

Tracy Kuhns and Michael Roberts have lived and fished a long time in Lafitte, LA, near the marsh-fringed Barataria Bay. For generations, families in the area have earned a living by harvesting fish, shrimp, and oysters from these waters. And until the oil spill, it seemed like the next generation would, too.

“My grandson has been going trawling since he was 18 months old. The boy can fish,” says Kuhns. “Before the oil spill, he never even thought about doing anything else.” Now, they say, the spill has caused lasting, perhaps irreparable, damage to a resource already threatened by pollution and coastal erosion.

“Barataria Bay was ground zero for all of that oil,” said Kuhns, who

witnessed layers of black sludge floating to the surface. After the spill, she estimates, “our shrimp [harvest] went down by 60 to 70 percent. Fish and crabs, same thing.”

Kuhns and Roberts have been working with GO FISH (Gulf Organized Fisheries in Solidarity & Hope), a multi-ethnic coalition of ten Louisiana organizations that advocates for fishing families and educates them about their rights.

“Kids from fishing families are used to being out on a boat every day. Since the oil spill, it’s been hard for them to understand why they can’t be on the water, catching catfish,” said Kuhns. “Since then,” she added of her grandson, “he’s been a little lost.”

Lawyers speak of the slow pace of addressing claims made by subsistence harvesters, and how the lack of resolution leaves fishing communities unsure how to proceed.

DISRUPTION OF THE ORGANIZATION AND FUNCTIONING OF THE COMMUNITY

Distant from urban centers, challenged by natural disasters, linked in common to a fragile ecosystem, and armed with a variety of useful skills, the “bayou communities” have a long history of mutual aid and cohesiveness. As Byron Encalade, President of the Louisiana Oystermen Association, notes, “Everybody’s connected to the environment, and they’re connected to their families, and they’re connected to their community. It’s just all linked. And so when one thing is disrupted or damaged, the entire community becomes damaged.”

These characteristics have helped them through many natural disasters, as they respond and rebuild together. Fishing families can share skills when the need arises; if the shrimping is poor one season, they can turn to the garden; if the wind

knocks down a henhouse, one family can offer carpentry in exchange for net repair.

The oil spill undermined this mutual aid and community spirit. No one person could clean up the oil; no one could trade net repair services for fresh seafood. Families and neighbors were idled, frustrated, confused.

Moreover, they were all left vying for resources from the same distant entities: the companies who were responsible for the spill. They remain unsure whether to file claims, unsure how to proceed.

CONCERNS ABOUT PHYSICAL HEALTH EFFECTS

Concerns about health effects of the spill pertain to exposure both to crude oil and to the dispersants used in the cleanup; and include the people who participated in the cleanup (52,000 by August 2010), as well as the coastal residents living near the oil and the chemicals.

A number of studies have established that chemicals in crude oil and dispersants can cause a wide range of health effects in people and wildlife. The chemicals can affect respiratory and nervous systems,

brain, liver, and kidney, and the skin. The damage may be evident upon exposure, or may take months or years to appear. The chemicals can impair normal growth and development, including direct fetal damage. They can cause mutations that may lead to cancer and multi-generational birth defects.⁶ It’s likely to take many years to gain a full picture of the physical effects in the Gulf Coast.

The most common symptoms reported include itchy eyes, watery eyes, nosebleeds, wheezing, sneezing, and coughing—all recognized as resulting from exposure to crude oil. Residents also report new incidences of cancer, lesions, and seizures.

The spill has also changed the diet of the coastal communities. Whereas once they relied on fresh-caught seafood as a mainstay of their diets, now they find it difficult to harvest enough to feed their families. This has been particularly hard on subsistence fishers. Gone are the days of tables and flatbed trailers covered in fresh seafood ready for eating.

Because seafood is less plentiful, the residents rely on other foods from other sources. This requires cash in place of labor, or in place of a web of friends and family who share the harvest. They are more likely to turn to cheaper, more processed, less nutritious food. This can have both an immediate and long-term deleterious effect on their health.

MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

Coastal residents continue to express a deep level of stress and anger since the spill, and find themselves in difficult situations. Men and women who previously spent their days working on the water now spend hours at home; as businesses idle, there is less to do—keeping books, traveling to town, repairing equipment. The uncertainty of when, or if, things will get back to normal creates anxiety and tension.

“What’s gonna happen?” said Michael Roberts of GO FISH. “We pray it’s gonna get better—I mean, we’re truly optimists. You have to be an eternal optimist to be in the fishing business. Every time you go out, it’s basically a gamble that you’re gonna pay for the fuel and ice, and then make extra money to take home to your families... But in the back of our minds, we really don’t know what’s gonna happen out there. We see a lot of things now that we’ve never seen before.”

Michel Claudet, president of Terrebonne Parish, worries about an array of mental health issues afflicting residents. At the same time, the resources available to help diagnose and treat mental health problems have not expanded to accommodate the increased need.

Naturally, when one family member suffers stress, anger, or depression, it impacts others. Evidence points to an increase in domestic violence. In the months following the spill, calls to the National Domestic Violence Hotline in Louisiana increased by 21 percent. The Louisiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence reports heightened levels of domestic violence still plague affected communities.

As well, people report that children have been significantly impacted by the spill. One government leader said: “I feel that the children are going to be the most affected by this. They look at their parents going through something difficult but they don’t understand it and then they wonder if it is about them. They are the ones that need the help and attention.”

Another resident said “I am scared for their future and their health.”

ECONOMIC IMPACTS ON COASTAL WELL-BEING

The disaster has caused loss of business and employment and income for those

working in the three dominant sectors of fishing, tourism, and oil and gas. Many businesses are involved in these industries; for example, fishing requires fuel, ice, nets, trucks, retail outlets.

The unemployed and underemployed try to maintain themselves with whatever resources they have. They turn to payday loans, thrift shops, pawnshops, food banks, day-old bakery stores, and banks for loans. The demand for food has been so large that the stock at food banks has not been adequate. “Only when they are desperate do I see them,” said a pawnshop employee in Terrebonne. “Well, there are a lot of desperate people.”

Again, the communities are suffering because of the particular nature of the disaster. After a hurricane, they are able to turn to various sources of supplemental assistance (private nonprofits, government agencies, religious institutions). Years after the spill, they are unlikely to find help at these places.

Many residents indicate they have been unable to obtain bank loans (they have no collateral and are unemployed). Instead, people turn to payday loan stores charging interest rates as high as 300 percent.

MOVING FORWARD TO RECOVERY AND RESTORATION

Damage to natural resources has disproportionate impacts on the health and well-being of low-income, disadvantaged, and culturally significant populations. It is imperative to set objectives for reducing risks and creating opportunity for vulnerable populations.

Nowhere have we seen this more clearly than in the Gulf Coast of the US. Over the next few years, the Gulf Coast states will see a flow of funding to help repair and rebuild the environment and the economy. The Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) requires those responsible for oil spills to restore or replace the natural resources (or pay the costs of doing so). The RESTORE Act, passed in 2012, guarantees that 80 percent of the Clean Water Act fines collected from responsible parties will return to the Gulf states; the final amount may be as high as \$21 billion.

Efforts to restore the Gulf need to focus on the people as much as on the lands and water. When these communities are more resilient, they are better able to prepare for, respond to, and recover from any future disaster. Plans to enhance community resilience should focus on those communities that are vulnerable on physical, economic, social and cultural levels.

- **RESTORE NATURAL PROTECTION TO REDUCE SOCIAL VULNERABILITY.** Socioeconomic factors (including poverty, race, gender and employment) affect a community’s ability to recover from disaster. Since the most vulnerable communities are at the most risk, they would benefit the most from restoration of natural flood protection (such as barrier islands, wetlands and oyster reefs).
- **PROTECT A WAY OF LIFE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE.** Culture plays a significant role in how communities cope with disaster. Planning should identify and prioritize the restoration of habitats that have played a vital role in culturally important, natural resource-dependent coastal communities for generations.
- **PROMOTE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, JOBS AND TRAINING.** Targeting vulnerable families for jobs and skills training connected to restoration projects can promote greater financial security to deal with future hazard risks. It’s vital to encourage projects that partner with and provide resources to community development organizations, and to connect vulnerable workers with economic opportunities.



OXFAM AMERICA IN THE GULF COAST

Oxfam America is committed to increasing the resiliency of communities along the Gulf Coast. Oxfam's Gulf Coast program combines financial support to key partner organizations with on-the-ground technical support as it focuses on addressing long-standing regional issues, including coastal restoration and workforce development.

NOTES

1. The Center for Hazards Assessment, Response & Technology at the University of New Orleans (UNO-CHART) conducted a series of interviews in the "oiled" communities in the Gulf Coast in 2013. During the course of these interviews, many people agreed to be quoted for the report, but requested to remain anonymous. We have included as much information about the participants as possible.
2. Megan Donovan, Suzanna Smith, Heidi Radunovich, and Michael Gutter, University of Florida. "Impacts of Technological Disasters" <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/FY/FY123000.pdf>. FCS9265, one of a series of the Family Youth and Community Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date May 2011. Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32613
3. FEMA refers to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which "coordinates the federal government's role in preparing for, preventing, mitigating the effects of, responding to, and recovering from all domestic disasters."
4. RESTORE Act refers to the Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourism Opportunities and Revived Economy of the Gulf Coast Act. To help ensure that fines and penalties associated with the oil spill are used to restore damaged resources, Congress passed the Restore Act in 2012, which commits 80 percent of Clean Water Act fines (which could be as high as \$21 billion) to Gulf Coast restoration.
5. NRDA refers to Natural Resource Damage Assessment. After a disaster, the NRDA process mandates studies to identify the extent of resource injuries, the best methods for restoring those resources, and the type and amount of restoration required.
6. *Emergency Responder Health: What Have We Learned from Past Disasters?* Bob Weinhold, MA, Environmental Health Perspectives. 2010 August; 118(8): A346-A350. PMID: PMC2920106. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2920106/>

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- CNN, "Empty Nets in Louisiana Three Years After the Spill," April 29, 2013

PHOTOS

- FRONT: Idled boats in a marina in Pointe à la Hache in Plaquemines Parish, LA. *Mary Babic/Oxfam America*
- PAGE 2: Fisherman Lloyde Duncan (I), 74, of Venice, LA has fished all his life. *Audra Melton/Oxfam America*
- PAGE 4: Michael Roberts and Tracy Kuhns. *Mary Babic/Oxfam America*
- BACK: Idled boat in Plaquemines Parish, LA. *Mary Babic/Oxfam America*

ABOUT THIS REPORT

In 2013, Oxfam America commissioned the Center for Hazards Assessment, Response & Technology at the University of New Orleans (UNO-CHART) to conduct a series of interviews in the "oiled" communities in the Gulf Coast.

The research team talked to residents and to representatives of economic, government, social and environmental institutions.

The project lead and a team of residents from five communities conducted a total of 77 individual and group interviews of residents, and prepared summaries of the impacts the residents described; they shared the summaries with the subjects later. In many cases, the subjects did not agree to be identified by name.

UNO-CHART also conducted 62 interviews with a wide range of governmental (7), business (20), religious and nonprofit organizational representatives (35).