

OFFSHORE DISASTER:

Impacts of the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill on Turtles, Marine Mammals, Brown Pelicans, and Bluefin Tuna

The ecological impacts of the British Petroleum (BP) Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill are rapidly escalating as BP's oil well leaks between 5,000 – 60,000 barrels (210, 000 – 2,520,000 gallons) of crude oil each day into Gulf of Mexico. The spill, which is estimated to be more than 130 miles long and 70 miles wide, will impact the coastlines of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida, and threaten hundreds of species in the Gulf of Mexico, including endangered and rare species.

SEA TURTLES

The BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill may harm several species of sea turtles, including endangered species, that live, migrate and breed in the Gulf of Mexico. Of particular concern is the endangered Kemp's Ridley turtle, which only nests in the western Gulf of Mexico. In addition, the main feeding ground of the Kemp's Ridley turtle is in the area of the BP oil spill.

Sea turtles nest on beaches, and some adult female turtles will refuse to nest on an oiled beach. Even approaching beaches could cause sea turtles to become coated in oil. The BP oil spill has already reached Gulf coastlines and barrier islands, and could impact the hatching success of sea turtles. In fact, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration found that even when sea turtle eggs survive to hatching, oil exposure can often lead to developmental deformities. In addition, NOAA experts state that sea turtle eggs exposed to oil in the last half of the incubation period are less likely to hatch.

Sea turtle hatchlings also spend a greater proportion of their time at the water's surface than adults, and their risk of oil exposure is higher. Sea turtles who are exposed to oil may become physically impaired, and may experience intestinal problems and buoyancy problems due to the toxic effects of the oil and chemical dispersants.

WHALES AND DOLPHINS

The BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill poses a unique threat to marine mammals, such as whales and dolphins that must reach the water's surface to breathe. The oil slick at the water's surface, as well as air toxins from the oil, can harm marine mammals and contaminate their food sources.

Marine mammals, such as sperm whales and bottlenose dolphins in the spill area can be poisoned from oil exposure, and can suffer organ damage, ulcers, or internal bleeding as a result. Even the oil fumes at the water's surface can injure marine mammals by damaging the respiratory tract and making it difficult to breathe. Young whales and dolphins are particularly vulnerable, as they do not have a protective layer of blubber, leaving their skin more prone to chemical burns and infection.

After the Exxon Valdez, studies found that marine mammal populations suffered a serious decline for many years after the oil spill. In particular, a study of orcas (killer whales) revealed that two orca "pods" lost approximately 40 percent of their population after the spill. In addition, the orcas reproductive capacity was severely diminished, and nearly half of newborn calves did not survive.



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BROWN PELICANS

On May 7, 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service closed the Breton National Wildlife Refuge, a 5,000 acre wilderness area that is home to the Brown Pelican, Louisiana's state bird. Already, thick, emulsified oil is washing ashore at this refuge.

The Breton Refuge barrier islands are nesting grounds and coastal feeding areas of the Brown Pelican, a species in the midst of its breeding season. Recent ground surveys at Breton National Wildlife Refuge found roughly 2,000 pairs of brown pelicans. The BP oil spill could pose a serious threat to the Pelican's reproductive success, as many pairs are already incubating eggs and will nest with their young for the next several months. The Pelican population is also unlikely to move away from oily waters because they are nesting. The disruption to the Brown Pelican's breeding cycle, combined with the Pelican's low reproductive rate, could reduce the population.

The Brown Pelican is especially vulnerable because it nests on the ground or in mangroves along the shoreline. In addition, Brown Pelicans are dependent on the health of coastal waters, and feed by plunging directly into the water to retrieve fish. If the Pelicans come into contact with oil, they may be unable to fly, remain afloat or stay warm under oiled feathers.

BLUEFIN TUNA

The North Atlantic Bluefin Tuna is already on the brink of extinction due to overfishing, and the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill may have a serious impact on the population of Bluefin Tuna in the Gulf of Mexico. The Bluefin Tuna is a species of particular concern because it spawns in the Gulf of Mexico between mid-April and mid-June.

In fact, the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill is centered near one of the Bluefin Tuna's preferred breeding grounds. Young Bluefin Tuna will be most vulnerable to the toxic effects of the oil and the chemical dispersants. Adult Bluefin Tuna may also be harmed as oil moves up the food chain, contaminating the Bluefin's prey, or making it more scarce during spawning season. In addition, oil can enter the Bluefin's gills, making it difficult for the fish to breathe, and decreasing the likelihood of survival.



THE SOLUTIONS

The BP Deepwater Disaster and other catastrophes like it are predictable outcomes of our reliance on fossil fuels. We must change course. Congress must act now to:

- Put stricter regulations in place for the coal and oil industries to make them safer and more accountable for the damage they do.
- Place a ban on new offshore drilling
- Pass legislation that jumpstarts a clean energy revolution in the U.S.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Help prevent another disaster by taking action to stop offshore drilling. The "drill, baby, drill" slogan of fossil fuel proponents must be replaced with the demand for clean energy. Visit <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/news/gulf-oil-spill> today and tell your member of Congress to support a clean energy future.