



22 June 2010

Dear COASSTers

On April 22nd, when the Deep Water Horizon oil rig blew, little did we know the magnitude of the disaster that would befall the Gulf of Mexico. Starting with the tragic loss of life of the rig workers, and spreading out to envelope ecosystems from the ocean floor to the salt marshes of Louisiana, the impact of oil, of drilling, will ultimately touch all of us.

For me, the numbers are frankly impossible to comprehend. What was reported to be 1,000 barrels a day is now widely believed to be 40,000. How much is that? A barrel is 42 gallons, so that's 1.68 million gallons of oil a day. That's a spill the size of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill every 6 days. And it's been 62 days. But these numbers are deceptive, as large as they are. Just one gallon of oil can contaminate thousands of gallons of seawater. It takes much less than a gallon to coat the feathers of a bird.

And how many birds will be affected? The rig is 250 miles offshore, although oil has now reached many corners of the Gulf, and threatens shorelines from Texas to Florida and into the Caribbean. One thing that's important to remember is that wildlife oiled so far out at sea have little chance of washing ashore – dead or alive – to be counted. It's a sad fact that oil spills only really resonate with the public once oil hits the beach. But marine wildlife can be devastated by oil that never ventures to shore. A pelican diving into an oil patch after the fish attempting to hide under the sheen will not make it back to the colony to feed it's chicks. Will thousands be oiled? Tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands? We may never know given the scope and size of the disaster. And how to gauge the lingering ecosystem effects the oil has, as zooplankton and fish populations that feed upper-trophic predators - like seabirds - are reduced in size, redistributed in space, and contaminated in body.

And if carcasses do reach the shore, what is the baseline? Unfortunately, COASST has no sister program in the Gulf. So, although the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the state wildlife agencies throughout the region, are racing to document what's on every inch of Gulf beaches, that's only a current snapshot. If the spill had happened in the Pacific Northwest, we would have a lock on what's normally there, thanks to years of your efforts. And I am – selfishly – *so thankful* that our coastline remains largely pristine.

What can we do? COASST is already playing a small part, as our East Coast field guide is in use even now to identify beached birds washing in from Florida to Louisiana. And of course we stand ready to help out, from working with wildlife officials to partnering with local bird and conservation organizations to extend citizen science to the Gulf.

As individuals, you can do what you're already doing – participate in COASST, or any other citizen science program that allows the public to get directly involved in science and ecosystem monitoring. At the end of the day, we can only save something we both care, and know, about. And much of caring stems from direct experience. So next time you schedule your COASST survey, take a friend or a family member along. Getting someone else involved may be the best way to affect change.

A spill of this magnitude, and complication, is frustrating to say the least. We all want it stopped, and cleaned up. It's heartbreaking to see the images of oiled Brown Pelicans or sea turtles. But I would like you to know that beyond my anger at this event I also find myself grateful to all of you for being involved in COASST, for helping to create the baseline that we have, and for knowing and caring about your own coastal environment.

And as always, I welcome your thoughts and suggestions about what COASST, and COASSTers, can do.

Cheers,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julia', with a stylized, cursive script.

Julia