

'Green' Movement Hopes Oil Spill Will Spur Major Change

Tamara Lush, Associated Press

VENICE, La. (AP) — In the weeks after an oil rig exploded and killed 11 men in the Gulf of Mexico, worried environmental groups scoured the water for oil plumes, set up animal triage centers and stretched boom across shorelines.

Activists hope their involvement doesn't end there; maybe, they contend, this is the catalyst that America's green movement needs. Will Americans be horrified enough by the news to pump less gasoline, buy hybrids and downsize their consumer lifestyle?

"We all need to take a hard look at how we're living. And how that is having an impact on our world and the health of the planet," said Larry Schweiger, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation. "How long will it take for folks to wake up to the truth? Clearly, if there is a moment for us to wake up, this is it."

But asking Americans to pay attention is easier if there are dramatic photos and videos tugging at heartstrings. So far, there have been few such images in this disaster. Though more than 4 million gallons have been spilled in the three weeks since the explosion, slow-moving currents in the Gulf have kept the thickest oil offshore and away from coastal wildlife.

That hasn't stopped environmental activists from trying to publicize how much the spill will affect the region.

Ten days after the rig explosion, Schweiger and a team of National Wildlife Federation staff had rented a condo in Venice, a small Louisiana fishing village 70 miles south of New Orleans that has become a staging area of sorts. Guys with GREENPEACE T-shirts mixed on docks with charter boat captains and international media. Leilani Munter, an IndyCar racer and environmental activist who blogs under the name "carbonfreegirl," was there, taking video of the effect on local fishermen.

Last week, Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune flew over the Gulf in a seaplane to survey the damage. He saw waves of rust-colored oil undulating through the blue water, toward sensitive bird habitat.

"We saw high concentrations of oil," he said. "We flew over a very small portion of this. This is a spill that extends for miles and miles and miles and miles. It will be one of the largest manmade disasters ever and the impact will be profound."

It's been relatively easy for environmental groups to detail the spill's human toll. Eleven men on the oil rig were killed. Thousands of fishermen on the coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida are no longer making money now that

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the federal government has shut down commercial fishing in a big chunk of Gulf waters.

It's been a little more difficult to explain to the American public how the spill is affecting the environment — or why people should change their habits to help the situation. Only a few birds have been brought in to cleaning centers, and while several dozen turtles and a few dolphins have washed up — none with visible oil — scientists aren't so sure that has anything to do with the spill.

Photos and videos of brown, pudding-like oil in the water near the well far out to sea don't have the same impact that it would if and when such sludge makes it to beaches in big quantities.

It was images of another oil spill — a massive gusher off the coast of Santa Barbara in California in 1969 — that galvanized people to create the first Earth Day in 1970.

Yet after the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989, environmentalists were hoping it would change both public policy, opinion and behavior.

"But it didn't," said Rick Steiner, a former University of Alaska marine conservation specialist who has been doing volunteer work in Louisiana for Greenpeace. "Exxon Valdez did make tanker transport safer. I was hoping it would result in a sustainable energy push in the U.S. but it didn't."

Steiner thinks this Gulf spill could "become like Chernobyl or Three Mile Island or Bhopal" — a moment where people, and politics transform.

"Maybe this is the straw," he said. "Maybe this is the incident that will catalyze both the individual consumer's behavior and the political policy change."

It could change if more photos and pictures of oiled animals emerge.

"People have a deep connection to the wildlife and the beauty of the wildlife, and when they see those pictures of the birds, the turtles, the things that are harmed, there's a gut emotional reaction," said Marylee Orr, executive director of Lower Mississippi Riverkeeper, a Louisiana-based advocacy group.

Advocates acknowledge there is a disconnect between consumer behavior — and the dependence on oil — and what is happening now in the Gulf.

"I would like to see people make a connection to this incident and their everyday behavior," said David Ringer, a spokesman for the National Audubon Society. "For people to realize that our individual choices every day have a tremendous effect on the planet and all the life we share this planet with."

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