

# OFFSHORE DISASTER:

## Ecological Impacts of BP's Gulf Oil Spill

The long-term ecological impacts of the Gulf oil spill have yet to be fully understood, following the the leaking from BP's Deepwater Horizon rig of 5 million barrels (205.8 million gallons) of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. The spill, which at one pointed was estimated to be more than 130 miles long and 70 miles wide, impacted the coastlines of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida, and threatened hundreds of species in the Gulf of Mexico, including endangered and rare species.

## THE FRAGILE GULF ECOSYSTEM

Unfortunately, the fragile Gulf of Mexico ecosystem is no stranger to oil spills. After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, several oil rigs sunk into Gulf waters, were damaged, or lost at sea. In the Gulf region, oil spills have proven to be a regular consequence of the nation's continued reliance on fossil fuels. No one knows the cumulative impact that repeated oil spills will have on the Gulf ecosystem, but experts predict that the effects of the BP's Gulf oil spill will be pervasive. For example, a recent study of the Exxon Valdez spill reported that Alaska wildlife are still ingesting oil from the Exxon Valdez spill over twenty years later.

The timing of BP's Gulf oil spill was particularly devastating to the Gulf ecosystem because it happened at peak spawning and nesting season for many species of fish, birds, turtles and marine mammals. Many species remain in long-established breeding areas during this time, some of which are in the direct path of the oil spill. Similarly, the gulf coast provides millions of acres of coastal wetlands and marshes that are critical habitat for migrating birds, including the brown pelican, Louisiana's state bird, and numerous designated "Important Bird Areas" where endangered birds are known to take refuge.

Although no one can predict the full impact of the spill on the Gulf, Gulf coast beaches, marshes, and bayous, the sheer number of rare and endangered species in the area create an urgent need to protect the fragile Gulf ecosystem from further damage from fossil fuel pollution. As the oil continues to spread through the water column, and pollution continues travels up the food chain, several important and endangered species are at risk.

## AT RISK SPECIES:

**North Atlantic Bluefin Tuna:** On the brink of extinction due to overfishing, the bluefin tuna spawn in the Gulf of Mexico between mid-April and mid-June.

**Sea Turtles:** Several species of sea turtles, including endangered species, live, migrate and breed in the Gulf region, especially in the warm waters south of Mississippi.

**Sharks:** Shark species, which are now beginning their spawning season in the Gulf, are known to raise their young in the grassbeds south of the Chandeleur Islands, very close to the oil spill.

**Whales and Dolphins:** The BP Gulf oil spill poses a unique threat to marine mammals, such as whales and dolphins that must reach the water's surface, even if it is covered by oil slick, to breathe. The oil slick itself, as well as the air toxins created by the oil spill, will pose serious threats to the known population of sperm whales in the spill area, and could contaminate food sources.

**Brown Pelicans:** The BP Gulf oil spill has affected the barrier island nesting grounds and coastal feeding areas of the brown pelican, Louisiana's state bird. Although no longer listed as endangered species, the oil could pose a threat to the pelican's reproductive success.

**Shorebirds:** Many shorebirds migrate and nest along the Gulf coastline, and are particularly vulnerable to shoreline oil pollution. The oil spill could affect the beaches and coastal waters that shorebirds such as terns, sandpipers, egrets and other shorebirds use to feed, migrate and nest. In addition, some migratory shorebirds stop on Gulf islands to rest and feed during migration.

## IMPACTS ON FISHERIES

The ecological damage from the BP Gulf oil spill could also extend to the commercial fisheries and shrimp farms that extend along the Gulf coast. Oyster farms are particularly sensitive to oil pollution because oysters are filter feeders, and likely to ingest oil particles as well as chemical dispersants and oil-soaked plankton. Any seafood that is harvested from the Gulf Coast will need to be monitored closely to ensure that it is safe for human consumption.

## THE SOLUTIONS

- » The BP Gulf oil spill 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
- » There should be an immediate end to all subsidies for fossil fuels and nuclear energy and investments should be focused on clean renewable energy, efficiency technology, and infrastructure development.
- » Pass legislation that jumpstarts a clean energy revolution in the U.S.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

Help prevent another disaster by learning more about clean energy solutions and by taking action at [www.greenpeace.org/usa/oilspilltruth](http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/oilspilltruth)

Note: All figures stated are based on August 2010 information