

Masking the Extent of the Disaster: The Worst of the Gulf Oil Spill has not been Revealed

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One of the biggest hurdles to covering the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was actually [getting a good look at the oil](#). For somewhat murky reasons (health, safety of fragile habitats), press has been repeatedly forbidden to enter impacted areas by the Coast Guard, BP, or the Fish & Wildlife Service.

I was on the ground in the Gulf. Trying to get the story from one of the fishermen contracted to work with BP was like asking them if they'd like a root canal on the spot. Word is that cleanup workers are told if they talk to the press, they're fired. And then there are the toxic [chemical dispersants](#), which plays the biggest role in masking the extent of the disaster's damage by breaking the oil up and spreading it out — at who knows what cost. So, the question is, will anyone ever see the worst of the catastrophic BP Gulf oil spill? Here are the five main reasons that you might not.

1. It's Not a Photogenic Disaster ... Yet

I spent the [last 10 days traversing the Gulf coast](#), and I hardly saw few traces of actual oil. I know that there are videos out there that show how devastating the spill is — the one [that shows the 'Gulf bleeding'](#) is especially powerful. But I'm afraid it's not powerful in the conventional sense — most people probably don't see the copper colored water and the oily sheen over the waves as tragic, necessarily, but bizarre.

There is no doubt that the millions of gallons of oil currently floating around in the Gulf of Mexico will be supremely hazardous to wildlife and the local economy. But it sometimes seems the whole event is registering closer to a curiosity than a tragedy to those not immediately connected to it.

2. Chemical Dispersant Cover-Up

Which brings us to what may be BP's greatest aide in furthering this aim: [the chemical dispersants](#). BP's plan to spray the dispersants on the leak from the source — as well as dump them from planes flying above — will effectively prevent oil from reaching the shore in the same form that the notorious slicks did in famous spills like the Exxon Valdez.

Despite the fact that nobody is sure exactly how toxic the stuff is, or how being deployed on such a large scale will effect ecosystems, it will have at least one effect: it will delay public outrage by [masking the apparent extent of the spill's damage](#). After all, BP must know how damaging the Valdez spill was for Exxon's image — some people still conjure up pictures of oil-coated birds at the mention of the brand. But make no mistake — chemical dispersants

will disrupt ecosystems in a massive way, even if you never see the true effect with your own eyes.

3. BP, Feds Cutting Off Press?

But there are other concerns as well. Most recently, [video surfaced of the Coast Guard turning press away](#), claiming it was BP's orders. An NPR team was turned away when trying to access the oil-hit Chandeleur barrier island chain. The workers hired to cleanup the spill seem to be under pressure not to talk to press — whenever I would approach a hired fisherman or contractor, they'd most often wave me away, or refuse to talk on record.

When I contacted a BP community liaison, he essentially dared me to call his bluff: he didn't deny the contractual clause, but he did say "I've got fishermen in my office all the time — you want to talk to one right now?" But that was hardly reassuring, and obviously not an acceptable circumstance for an unbiased interview.

I attribute some of the press exclusion from the feds to a messy bureaucratic command structure — officials flown in from all over the nation were giving, deflecting, and misinterpreting orders, and sending them on down the line to crews. But there does seem to be a pointed effort, especially from BP, to drastically restrict press access.

4. Relative Public Apathy

Satellite images, oddly colored water, a collapsed hi-tech rig — it all might seem more like a strange spectacle than a catastrophe. Fox News' anchor Brit Hume summed up the apathy the other day when he retorted "Show me the oil."

Of course, the thousands of people who are losing their livelihoods and the conservationists who understand the impact oil will have on undersea food chains are confident that this is nothing short of a disaster. But without pictures of devastated wildlife — which thus far have been few and far between — or blackened coastlines, I fear that most will continue to underestimate how damaging this spill will be. That would, of course, play directly in BP's favor — and undercut further investigative efforts.

5. It's More Convenient to Conceal the Devastation

One oft-voiced worry among conservation groups and other press that I heard as I trekked from marina to marina, city to city around the Gulf, was that there would only be interest in ensuring that justice was brought to those impacted by the spill as long as the cameras were rolling. And without any distinctly shocking material to film, those cameras would be rolling away sooner rather than later.

Which is why it's important that the Coast Guard explain a concrete policy for press access and that BP encourage the fishermen who've been out in the field to speak up about their encounters with the oil. If they have nothing to hide, then why clamp down, right? It's a spooky thought, but if there are images of gruesomely oil-slicked beaches and blackened birds, the public has a right to see it. Even if this does sound distressingly like a call for sensationalism — it's in part because that very sensationalism will help bolster conservation

efforts and strengthen sound policy initiatives.

And of course, I believe that the use of chemical dispersants is far too dangerous a gamble, and not only because it helps prevent people from grasping the severity of the spill, but because of the unknown long-term threats they pose to marine habitats. This stuff could yet emerge as the dominant narrative of the Gulf spill in hindsight, damaging food chains for generations, or worse.

The point of all of this is: don't believe just your eyes — listen to reports coming in from legitimate conservation scientists and investigative journalists. Much of the press down there are out on the boats every day, desperately trying to get the best sense of what's going on — and being thwarted by weather, BP, the dispersants, and sometimes evidently the Coast Guard. For 10 days, I was trying my best, too — and I can tell you, it's looking like we may never see the worst of this spill with our own eyes.

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