

This essay was originally written in August of 2009 for possible inclusion into my latest book, *LIVING SANIBEL - A Nature Guide to Sanibel & Captiva Islands*. Owing to space limitations it was left out of the book where it would have appeared in an editorial box. In hindsight I wish we had left it in, but I wanted to share it with all of my clients, friends and readers now because it speaks volumes about what is happening today off the coast of Louisiana. Maybe it should be called **294 Days**. What amazes me is that I have yet to hear a single reference to this 31-year-old disaster in any of the current coverage. *Why is that?*

Feel free to share it with your friends and family. I've also attached it as a pdf.

The True Cost of Oil

In the spring of 1979, PEMEX, Mexico's state-owned oil company, was drilling a two-mile-deep exploratory oil well in the Bay of Campeche, located in the southwest corner of the Gulf of Mexico. On June 3, 1979 that oil well, known as IXTOC 1, blew out. An unexpected loss of drilling mud circulation, just as the well struck a major oil and gas deposit, caused the blowout to occur. The pressurized oil and gas coming out of the well ignited, causing the drilling platform to catch fire, collapse and sink directly on top of the well head, hindering any immediate attempts to control the blowout.

Within moments of the blowout crude oil started pouring out of IXTOC 1 at a rate that fluctuated between 10,000 and 30,000 barrels per day. There are forty-two gallons in each barrel of oil. At its peak outflow of 30,000 barrels per day, IXTOC 1 was spewing 1,260,000 gallons of crude oil a day into the Gulf of Mexico.

Capping the well became the first priority but because of the depths involved, and the complications of having the drilling platform land on the BOP (the Blowout Preventer), IXTOC 1 continued pumping oil into the western Gulf of Mexico non-stop for another 294 days. After clearing the debris field, oil well experts, including the renowned oil well firefighter and specialist Red Adair, were able to reach the BOP within a few months time, but the internal pressure from the well exceeded the preventer's capacity and after a brief shut down, the BOP had to be reopened and the oil flow resumed. Two more wells were drilled into the deposit to relieve the pressure and finally, on March 23, 1980, a team of North Sea Norwegian experts were able to cap the well. The IXTOC 1 went down as the single largest accidental oil spill in history.

The *Exxon Valdez*, which struck a reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska, on March 24, 1989 spilled 10.8 million gallons of oil, which eventually covered 11,000 square miles of ocean. The IXTOC 1 oil well disaster pumped out 140 million gallons of crude, or 13 times the amount of the *Exxon Valdez*. At one point in time, the oil from this unprecedented blowout covered half of the Gulf of Mexico, some 300,000 square miles. Because of the prevailing loop current, oil from this spill made it all the way up to the Texas shoreline, six-hundred miles to the north.

The environmental impact was unprecedented. The only nesting beach in the world for the critically endangered Kemps Ridley sea turtle, located near Nuevo Rancho, Mexico, was covered in oil. The turtle eggs that had been deposited had to be dug up and transported to another beach to survive. The damage was widespread and catastrophic.

Sadly, we are hearing the same "Drill, baby drill!" mantra repeated today. Powerful lobbying efforts are underway by the oil and gas industry to allow drilling off the west coast of Florida. The engineers and scientists working for Exxon Mobile, Shell, Chevron and BP all assure us that modern BOPs will not fail and that today's oil platforms are capable of handling category 5 hurricanes without

incident.

What if they're wrong? Let us assume we have another uncontrolled blowout roughly twice the size of the *Exxon Valdez* disaster one hundred miles west of Captiva. The prevailing loop current would take the vast majority of the oil slick south toward the Dry Tortugas and the Florida Keys. Ironically, Sanibel and Captiva would probably not be impacted by the event.

Florida, especially the eastern seaboard of the state, would be overwhelmed. The only coral reef in the United States, from Fort Jefferson to John Pennekamp National Park would be ruined. The entire Keys fishing recreational fishing fleet would, just as did the commercial fishing fleet of Prince William Sound, collapse. Further up the coast, once the spill were carried north with the Gulf Stream, Miami and Palm Beach would suffer immeasurable damage. The cost of cleanup and mitigation could make entire municipalities fail.

Then consider the fact that a recent proposal by a Florida State Senator would allow drilling to occur as close as three miles from the mouth of the Caloosahatchee and an equal distance off the beaches of Captiva. An oil spill this close to shore, even one-tenth the size of the *Exxon Valdez*, and more than 100 times smaller than the IXTOC 1, would ruin the beaches and marine environments of Sanibel and Captiva within days.

The death toll to wildlife would be incomprehensible. The surface breathers; the endangered manatee, the Atlantic spotted porpoise and the bottle-nosed porpoises would be the first to die. With the surface of the water covered in a thick black ooze, every time these animals surfaced to breath their lungs would inevitably take in the toxic byproducts of the chemistry of oil—substances like toluene, which causes severed neurological harm and benzene, which has an anaesthetic property to it that sedates marine mammals, causing them to drown.

Even if they survive the initial spill, the volatile compounds of these and other hydrocarbons can damage red blood cells, suppress immune system, strain the liver, spleen and kidneys and even interfere with their ability to reproduce. The same physiological effects would occur to anyone living along the beaches where the crude oil inevitably would wash up. The value of a Gulf front home or condominium would drop precipitously overnight. No one in their right mind would want to live anywhere near the spill and the tax base of Lee County, supported by the higher property values of the barrier island properties, would tumble. The county would likely have to file for bankruptcy.

Wildlife and eco-tourism would walk hand in hand to a common grave. Tens of thousands of acres of red and black mangrove forest, unable to function properly because of the oil, would wither and die. Entire ecosystems would collapse along with the crabs, fishes and shrimp that form the marine matrix of life.

Even with extensive clean up, the lessons learned from Prince William Sound and the *Exxon Valdez* show us that the impact from a major oil spill can last for decades. Tar balls and traces of the oil would wash up on our beaches for the next thirty to forty years. Even the impact from drilling, the mud, the displaced sediment and the constant minor spills would be felt with oil rigs three miles offshore.

There is the larger issue of global warming. By feeding the cycle of CO² (carbon dioxide) through the burning of fossil fuels we are caught in a cycle of climate change wherein the hotter we make the planet, the stronger the hurricanes and the more at-risk the drilling platforms become. Florida, sitting at the epicenter of hurricane alley, can hardly afford more storms like Hurricane Katrina but, as the atmosphere warms, scientists predict that we will have fewer hurricanes but the ones that do form will likely be more powerful. With the vast majority of Floridians living along the coast and the cost of insuring their properties continually rising, why would we even consider adding

more greenhouse gases into the earth's atmosphere?

In the end, the oil found under the eastern Gulf of Mexico is too expensive to recover. Centuries from now, when all of mankind's energy needs are derived from renewable sources such as solar (have you ever heard of a solar panel array oil spill?), tidal, hydroelectric, wind and geothermal systems, it may well be noted that all of the world's vast carbon-based fuels should have been left untouched, given the long-term environmental impact the use of these hydrocarbons appear to be creating. From the mountaintop removal of West Virginia to the damage already done to the drilling fields of Texas and Colorado the true cost of oil may not be known for a thousand years. The Sunshine State should capitalize on it's greatest resource, sunshine, and become the solar capital of the Eastern United States. IXTOC 1 is more than a subtle reminder of that.

Charles Sobczak
a Florida Author
and Sanibel Resident