U. S. Environmental Protection Agency
Blog Round-up
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ROUND-UP OF MAJOR BLOGS

BP SPILL

June 14, 2010

Former EPA Chief On Gulf Oil Spill: 'It's Going To Blow The Record Books Up' (*Huffington Post*)

BP Oil Spill, Deepwater Horizon, Epa Oil Spill, Eric Schaeffer, Eric Schaeffer Oil Spill, Gulf Oil Spill, Oil, Oil Spill, Oil Spill Animals, Oil Spill Wildlife, Green News

GRAND ISLE, La. (AP) -- The astonishing news that the oil leak at the bottom of the sea may be twice as big as previously thought could have major repercussions for both the environment and BP's financial health, killing more marine life and dramatically increasing the amount the company must pay in fines and damages.

Scientists now say the blown-out well could have been spewing as much as 2 million gallons of crude a day before a cut-and-cap maneuver started capturing some of the flow, meaning more than 100 million gallons may have leaked into the Gulf of Mexico since the start of the disaster in April. That is more than nine times the size of the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster, previously the worst oil spill in U.S. history.

The larger estimates, while still preliminary and considered a worst-case scenario, could contribute to breathtaking liabilities against BP. Penalties can be levied against the company under a variety of environmental protection laws, including fines of up to $1,100 under the Clean Water Act for each barrel of oil spilled.

Based on the maximum amount of oil possibly spilled to date, that would translate to a potential civil fine for simple discharge alone of $2.8 billion. If BP were found to have committed gross negligence or willful misconduct, the civil fine could be up to $4,300 per barrel, or up to $11.1 billion.

"It's going to blow the record books up," said Eric Schaeffer, who led the Environmental Protection Agency's enforcement office from 1997 to 2002.

A larger spill also could lead to increased environmental hazards, with shrimp, crabs and fish such as marlin and swordfish especially hard hit.

"Certainly if there are greater volumes of oil than were originally estimated, that doesn't bode well," said Jim Franks, a fisheries biologist at the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast Research Laboratory. "Do we expect twice the impact? I don't know how to judge that, but that much more oil could not be good at all for fish and wildlife resources. I would anticipate far-reaching impacts."

Days after the spill began, government officials told the public that the ruptured well a mile below the Gulf was leaking 42,000 gallons a day. Then, officials said it was actually five times bigger. That estimate didn't last long either. The new estimates are based on spillcam video as well as such things as satellite, sonar and pressure readings.

The lead scientist in the effort said the most credible range at the moment is between 840,000 gallons and 1.68 million gallons a day.

Another part of the equation is how much more oil started to leak last week after the riser pipe was cut, a step that BP and government officials said could increase the flow by 20 percent. The pipe cut was necessary to install a cap over the well; the cap has captured an estimated 4 million gallons so far.

If the higher-end estimates prove accurate, the leak amounts to an Exxon Valdez every five days or so. At that rate, in just over three weeks from now it will eclipse the worst oil spill in peacetime history, the 1979 Ixtoc disaster in Mexico, which took 10 months to belch out 140 million gallons of oil into the Gulf.

And there's more bad news. The oil gushing from the Gulf contains large amounts of natural gas. Samantha Joye, a professor of marine sciences at the University of Georgia, said that can contribute significantly to oxygen levels plummeting in the water as microbes eat the methane clouds.

In addition to the potential for billions in fines, BP is responsible for paying all cleanup costs and up to $75 million for economic damages. But it could face far heavier expenses if gross negligence is found or if it is determined that there was a violation of a federal safety, construction or operating regulation, Schaeffer said.

"You bet the trial lawyers are sharpening their swords around that language," he said.

And that's not including the tens of billions of dollars in shareholder wealth that has already evaporated with the plunge of BP's stock since the disaster.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg became a lonely defender of BP, declaring the world should not rush to point fingers at the British oil giant. The billionaire tycoon often sides with CEOs and businesses entangled in public relations disasters.

"The guy that runs BP didn't exactly go down there and blow up the well," Bloomberg said on his weekly radio show. "And what's more, if we want them to fix it and they're the only ones with the expertise, I think I might wait to assign blame."

That the BP oil spill may be twice as bad as earlier estimates was hard news to hear but no surprise to Christian Delos Reyes, a 39-year-old oyster dredger.

"Crabs start real small. You know they're all going to die. It'll kill all the oysters. In my opinion, I don't think it'll ever be all right," Reyes said. "I think it's destroyed."

Wanda Kirby, 65, owns the Sandpiper Shores Motel in Grand Isle, La., a couple of hundred feet from where a long strand of bright orange boom slices across the beach to block the oil.

"Whether it's five gallons or five million, I don't care. We don't really need to be wasting time measuring it," she said. "We just need to stop it."

Progressive Groups Launch Double Barrel Ad Campaign Over Murkowski Vote (*Huffington Post*)

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Ad Campaign, Americans United For Change, Auc Ad Campaign, Big Oil Murkowski, Cew Ad Campaign, Clean Energy Works, Climate Change, Energy Debate, Murkowksi Resolution, Progressive Ad Campaign, Progressive Groups Ad, Politics News
A double barrel ad campaign was launched Monday morning with two progressive groups respectively thanking Democratic Senators for voting against a provision that would have ended the EPA's ability to regulate carbon emissions and punishing Republicans who backed the proposal.

Americans United For Change played the role of bad cop, going up on air with a $400,000-plus-ad purchase attacking Sens. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) and Richard Burr (R--N.C.) for supporting the resolution introduced by Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK). Coming days after the resolution was defeated by a closer-than-expected vote, the ads -- which are already running in Boston against Sen. Scott Brown (R-Mass) -- tie the oil spill in the Gulf (with a now-customary shot of a blackened pelican) and foreign threats from abroad (with an always classic shot of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) to energy politics in D.C.

Running in conjunction with the AUC ads will be a good-cop campaign from the group Clean Energy Works, which is airing spots that applaud a number of Democrats for voting against the Murkowski provision. Those receiving the thank-yous include Sens. Michael Bennet (Co.), Maria Cantwell (Wash.), Carl Levin (Mich.), Claire McCaskill (Mo.), Patty Murray (Wash.), Harry Reid (Nev.), Debbie Stabenow (Mich.), Mark Warner (Va.), and Jim Webb (Va.), with a group official adding that more are in the works.

RECYCLING

Posted: June 14, 2010 10:25 AM

Living in Hand-Me-Downs (*Huffington Post*)

Consumption , Recycling , Responsible Consumer , Simplicity , Living News
Some years back, a group of anti-poverty advocates cast their lot in with Chevy and Ford to oppose higher gas taxes.

"That's just stupid," said my ever-blunt brother, Dan.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because poor people can't afford new cars, so they get stuck with whatever rich people buy. If middle and upper class people are buying SUV's and sedans, then that's what's plentiful five years down the road, and poor people are stuck driving tanks. But when the cost of gas goes up, richer people buy smaller cars, and so poor people get to drive more efficient vehicles.

"Besides which, with a higher gas tax, more of the money stays in the local economy, particularly with local government. That revenue is what funds public transit, public schools, public health, public parks, etc... You get it -- all the stuff that differentiates poverty from POVERTY (i.e. no services). Fend off gas tax and the poor get stuck twice -- a fleet of inefficient, high-operating-cost used vehicles with no alternative to driving, and less of everything else that makes for "quality of life."

Duh. Why didn't I think of that?

His words come back to me, especially when I am traveling. That is because all over the world, people wear, drive, and eat hand-me-downs from middle class Westerners like me.

In the highlands of Guatemala, old school buses grind their way up and down gravel switchbacks, crammed with baskets of chickens and vegetables and indigenous people (who mercifully are short enough to squeeze into the child-sized seats without their knees in their faces).

British and American children's books ranging from The Velveteen Rabbit to Sponge Bob sit in dusty boxes in bookseller stalls in Trivandrum, India.

In Darjeeling, I once picked up a pair of pants that looked my style, only to notice that they still had a tag attached from Value Village, a thrift store chain at home. As I understand it, Value Village puts their "gently used" best on the shelves and sells the excess by the ton.

On market days, people walk from nearby farms and villages to converge on the streets of Ambositra, Madagascar. Freshly butchered meat hangs in wooden stalls, but baskets of rice, mounds of vegetables, and stacks of handmade brooms line the sidewalks and pavement. So do piles and piles of used Western clothes.

In Santo Domingo, Honduras, a rumpled array of cast-offs hangs in shops with signs that say, "American Clothes."

It's not that I have anything against hand-me-downs; far from it -- I'm wearing a second hand shirt and pants at this very moment, having filled our suitcases with hot-weather travel clothes from thrift stores before we launched ourselves across the equator. My daughters love shopping at our local Value Village, because it's the only place accessible by bike that their paltry allowance actually buys anything they might want. I credit myself with having taught them to filter for quality: fabrics that wash well, sturdy toys that hold up, puzzles with all their pieces. They can tell you that a shirt that started out in the Gap at $25.00 and one that started out in Wal-Mart at $7.99 are only a dollar or two apart by the time they reach the store we affectionately call the "VeyVey."

I wonder what the spread is between Gap and Wal-Mart by the time the shirts reach Ambositra or Santo Domingo. Whatever it may be, thanks to a system of global capitalism that ships used clothing (and old books and tired school buses) from one country to another, Western consumers effectively set both price points. That is because our demand becomes many people's supply. What we buy in large quantities is plentiful and cheap elsewhere. What we buy less of is scarce.

And regardless of how you feel about hand-me-downs in your drawers or suitcase, that raises some interesting questions about our pattern of consumption. When people like me buy durable goods with a long half-life, our cast offs that get sold by the ton have some life in them. When we prioritize cheap frills in our clothes and "bells and whistles" over durability in our consumer goods, people down the chain get clothes and gadgets that soon will need replacing. When as is so often the case, we buy semi-disposables, what goes into the shipping containers bound for developing countries is literally -- garbage.

Even then, poor countries take what we send. In a global version of the used-car dynamic Dan described, they are stuck with whatever we no longer want. A little bit of money flows our way if the stuff is useable; a little bit flows their way if it's waste. Either way, they can't often afford to say no. That is one reason the global market in cast offs provokes moral outcry on occasion -- for example, when middle class American's get new low flow toilets and hand on their water hogs to poor people, or when they get sleeker, smaller computers and ship the old ones to places where they will be used briefly and toxic for millennia.

Sometimes the casts offs of the West aren't post-consumer goods so much as manufactured surplus or rejects looking for a market. In the 1980's investigative reporters blew the whistle on chemical companies including Dow, DuPont, Monsanto, Ciba-Geigy and others, who were offloading excess chemicals that had been banned or severely restricted in the U.S. and Europe. One report summarized: "The world's major agrichemical corporations buy and sell products

which have been designated by scientific authorities as cancer-causing, sterility-inducing, birth-defect-creating, and nerve-damaging. Barrels of these toxins are dumped on countries where one or two officials often hold responsibility equivalent to that of the entire U.S. Environmental Protection Agency."

In the 1990's as North American and European doctors began to promote the health benefits of breastfeeding and Western mothers responded. Nestle took their unwanted baby formula elsewhere, giving free samples to poor mothers in developing countries who were then stuck using formula after their breast milk dried up. In recent years, Christian missionaries who couldn't sell homophobia and talk of witchcraft to educated Americans took their outdated biblical literalism to Central Africa where they sold it to Ugandan politicians and Nigerian community leaders. In these cases, selling cast-offs to vulnerable people caused deaths, and the public reacted.

But there are ethical questions at play even in something as seemingly innocuous as the global clothing market:

Consider, for example, the economics of raw materials: Behind the global sale of hand-me-downs is a supply and demand dynamic that makes many new goods unaffordable to most of the world's poor. For the whole current population of the world to live like Americans would take six planets worth of raw materials. Canada and the U.S., with five percent of the world's population, get credit for thirty five percent of global fuel consumption and nine percent of the planet's textiles. Since prices follow demand, it's possible that if we demanded a bit less some of the folks buying our cast offs could actually afford clothes that are new. In other words, they wouldn't be as poor.

Or consider the social dynamics of competition: Once people have the basics: food, shelter, and a stable community, whether people feel poor is largely a matter of social comparisons. American pioneers had far less in the way of material goods and comforts than your average slum dweller on the south side of Chicago, but they didn't feel as impoverished or degraded. The Spanish language has two words for poverty, miseria, which means wretched desperation, and pobreza, which can be accompanied by a sense of dignity and sufficiency. In a subsistence community with adequate rain and land and so a decent return on hard work, it is quite possible to feel proud and satisfied, to have both pobreza and contentment. But rich neighbors or landlords or public figures who strut their stuff can make bare bones living feel insufficient. Pobreza becomes miseria.

Thanks to television, rich neighbors can have this effect from thousands of miles away. Western markers of social status gets transmitted to poor villages where they feed desire. Fifteen years ago, Brian and I spent two weeks studying Spanish in a village called Todos Santos in the highlands of Guatemala. The language school placed us with a family whose two room dirt-floored house was divided between their living space (including an open cooking fire) and student residents like us. While we huddled in our room after dinner, they huddled in theirs, absorbing their only exposure to another way of life: the TV show Dallas, a high society soap opera in which petty quarrels get played out amidst all the trappings of conspicuous consumption

including pressed white shirts, coiffed hair, fancy cars, red fingernails, designer dresses and other bling.

Fashion -- by virtue of being frivolous -- lets us know who has money to spare and who doesn't. In this sense, clothing trends are designed to be competitive, to feed a sense of insufficiency and desire. No matter how functional or sturdy or new looking our clothes may be, and no matter how beautiful they seemed last year, if they are out of date, then we are supposed to feel inadequate. Broadly speaking, by participating in competitive consumption games with their winners and losers, we not only add to the economic inequality in my first point, we add to the social inequality in my second point. We make others more poor, and we make them feel even poorer and so drive consumption beyond the reach of our own pocketbooks.

Most of us most of the time don't go around trying to make other people feel inadequate. Often we are so busy advancing ourselves, cloaking our insecurities, fending off our secret imposter complexes, that we don't really think about how we are affecting who. It's not so much that we're trying to one-up others as that we fear being one down. It's a chimp thing, partly. Even without clothes and big brains, our relatives find their own ways to compete for social status, which confers sexual and culinary benefits. But there's more to the story than that. Thanks to advertisers and media we ourselves are subject to the same images and appeals as that Guatemalan family. And research has shown that we are far more susceptible to social influence, and advertising specifically, than we like to believe. So much of what drives us lies outside of awareness, and intention.

That brings me to what I think is the point of this meandering series of thoughts. Awareness and intention. Mindful living is something we can cultivate. The growing number of us who are planet-conscious have learned to ask where things come from: what resource is getting used up to satisfy my cravings? What species is threatened? Whose tiny fingers are running the sewing machine or knotting the wool? But apart from sorting the trash -- paper, plastic, glass, compost -- we seldom contemplate the life that's left in our goods when we're done with them or how our purchases affect what other people will have and want.

I know the mantra about simplicity. "Live simply so others can simply live." I believe in it. But if I'm honest, the best I can say is that it shapes my behavior somewhat, sometimes. The bottom line is that I still buy a lot of stuff, including things I don't need or won't wear out. And my gotta-have-thats make their way through the world long after something else has caught my fancy and I've tossed aside old infatuations for new, in fact, long after I've forgotten I ever craved or owned them.

What my brother Dan was saying, and what the used clothing stalls and stores and markets echo in their own way, is that spending money is powerful. That is a power I can use mindfully if I choose. Instead of simply wrestling with a set of yes/no purchase decisions, I can explore a broader set of questions: what kinds of cast offs do I want to be scattering across the planet like seeds in the wind? What kind of trends do I want to be setting? Do I treat my stuff like someone else will own it someday? How do I hand things off when I'm done with them?

If I ask these questions consciously, then underlying values (my values) get into my decisions about what I buy, how I treat it, and when I let it go. Come back to the opening theme, cars, for example. New technologies like hybrids are comparatively expensive. That is because they require innovation, and R&D is complicated and costly. But it also drives the kind of future I'd like to hand down to coming generations. When I buy a car, I can invest in the status quo, or I can buy a little bit of that future. And when it comes time to sell, I can hand someone else the same status quo or a chance to participate in that future. From this angle, the decision is a no-brainer.

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