

THE
BP DEEPWATER
HORIZON
DISASTER:
CHAPTER ONE



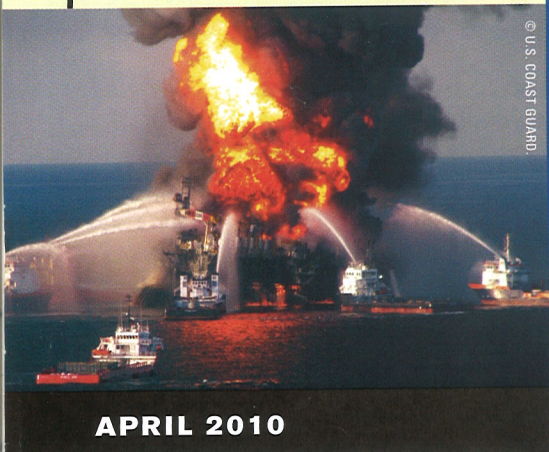
STANLEY SENNER

One year ago, on April 20, 2010, the explosion of BP's Deepwater Horizon rig killed eleven people and set in motion a disaster that would ultimately become the largest accidental marine oil discharge in history. Ocean Conservancy's Director of Conservation Science, Stanley Senner, who spent seven years as the Chief Restoration Planner for the state of Alaska following the *Exxon Valdez* tanker spill and Science Coordinator for the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council, offers his perspective on the past twelve months, the first chapter in a critical story for our nation—and our ocean.

Echoes of the *Exxon Valdez*
Senner was in Alaska when he heard the terrible news. "Ironically, I was attending a workshop on how to conduct a Natural Resource Damage Assessment in the event of an oil spill in the frigid and remote Arctic," he recalls. "As an Alaskan who experienced the *Exxon Valdez* in a very personal way, I had two immediate concerns. One was, 'What did this mean for the Gulf of Mexico?' And secondly, 'What if this had been the Arctic?'" Indeed, this was a question often asked in a year that brought so many huge challenges to the Gulf, despite the many oil-spill response services and resources available there.
The Gulf region became instantly shrouded in uncertainty. Would a way of life be lost? What would the disaster mean for iconic sea turtles, dolphins, and red snapper? How would the oil and massive application of chemical dispersants harm the Gulf ecosystem, impact the fisheries, and affect tourist destinations that underpin so much of the coastal economy?
Senner recalls Ocean Conservancy's immediate response: "The entire organization, from our president, Vikki Spruill, to program staff, recognized from the very outset that this was a transformative event." So, too, did members, who immediately called and

A CRITICAL YEAR IN REVIEW

- 20 In the Gulf of Mexico, BP's Deepwater Horizon drilling rig explodes.
22 BP's Deepwater Horizon rig sinks to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.



APRIL 2010

- 23 Ocean Conservancy Director of Conservation Science Stan Senner makes the following statement: "The Deepwater Horizon tragedy is yet another reminder that offshore drilling means significant risks for people and the environment. While the immediate priority is to locate missing workers and stem the flow of any oil from the well, everything possible must be done to limit the impact of this spill on fisheries, tourism and the productive Gulf of Mexico ecosystem."
28 NOAA reports that an estimated 5,000 barrels (210,000 gallons) of oil is gushing from the well daily—five times larger than the estimate provided by BP just days earlier.
30 As oil makes landfall, Ocean Conservancy Executive Vice President Dennis Takahashi-Kelso reminds the public of the most important emergency response step: Clean up all of the oil, gather science to determine the most ecologically vulnerable areas, listen to Gulf Coast citizens, and begin to build scientific baselines for restoration efforts.

- Ocean Conservancy and International Coastal Cleanup Coordinators organize beach Cleanups along the Gulf to collect trash on beaches not yet hit by oil, preventing the trash from becoming oil-contaminated waste.
2 NOAA officially begins a series of fishing closures in areas of the Gulf of Mexico.
7 A 125-ton containment dome is lowered over the main well leak, but fails to stop the oil flowing into the Gulf. Other containment strategies tried in the following days fail as well.
12 Ocean Conservancy Executive Vice President Dennis Takahashi-Kelso met with representatives of Gulf Coast communities affected by the spill, while Stanley Senner examined oil reaching marshes near Venice.

MAY

- 22 President Barack Obama signs an executive order that establishes the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling to find out the root causes of the disaster. Just two weeks before, on May 6, Ocean Conservancy's Stan Senner had called for a federal investigation into the cause of the disaster.
24 Commerce Secretary Gary Locke declares fishery disaster areas in the Gulf of Mexico. The affected area includes Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. The National Marine Fisheries Service increases the area closed to fishing to 54,096 square miles, slightly more than 22 percent of Gulf of Mexico federal waters. Two days later, Ocean Conservancy's Director of Fish Conservation and Gulf Restoration Chris Dorsett says, "We fully support the disaster declaration by Commerce Secretary Locke to pave the way for assistance to affected fishermen and fishing communities."

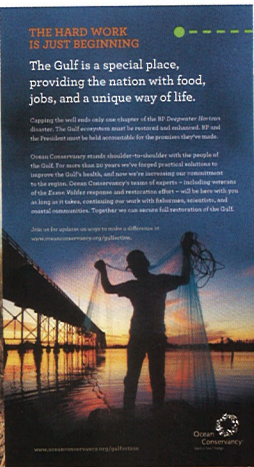
- 8 World Ocean Day arrives with millions of gallons of oil still spread throughout the Gulf of Mexico. Ocean Conservancy President and CEO Vikki Spruill says, "Our nation is facing the largest oil spill in US history, a human and environmental tragedy. This crisis should be a wake-up call. The immediate focus must remain on stopping the leak and containing the oil, and we must also do everything possible to ensure that the needs of affected communities are addressed."
15 President addresses the nation in a speech from the Oval Office about the oil disaster. The next day he earns a \$20 billion down payment commitment from BP to help satisfy individual and business claims from those suffering economically from the disaster.
JUNE
23 Ocean Conservancy Executive Vice President Dennis Takahashi-Kelso and board member Philippe Cousteau meet with Florida Governor Charlie Crist to discuss the disaster, view the spill from helicopters, and walk the beaches near Pensacola.
30 Ocean Conservancy Vice President for Conservation Programs Janis Jones testifies before Congress in support of reforming oil and gas development laws.

- 12 Macondo well is capped, though small seepages continue. Ocean Conservancy's Takahashi-Kelso says, "After some eighty-seven days, news that oil has stopped gushing into the ocean is an enormous relief. We will await the full results of integrity tests to learn if the Macondo well will remain shut, but today's developments are a very positive step forward."
19 President Obama signs an executive order establishing a National Ocean Policy, which creates a framework for protecting oceans and coasts.
22 NOAA reopens 1/3 of area closed to fishing due to spill.
30 The US House of Representatives passes the Consolidated Land, Energy and Aquatic Resources Act.

JULY

AUGUST

- Ocean Conservancy sent letters to Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus and others this month offering assistance in building a restoration plan.
26 Ocean Conservancy runs ads in *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* and *Mobile Press-Register* reminding the public of work ahead and offering email updates.



wrote offering extra support. There was no question that Ocean Conservancy would engage in a major way. Unlike many others, Ocean Conservancy had a longstanding presence in the region that provided a strong foundation for immediate response. In addition, Ocean Conservancy possessed the considerable expertise of two veterans of the *Exxon Valdez* spill: Senner and Executive Vice President Dennis Takahashi-Kelso, who served as Alaska's Commissioner of Environmental Conservation when the tanker ran aground. "We moved quickly to bring on additional advisors who have had experience not only with the *Exxon Valdez*, but other oil spills," adds Senner.

Restoring the People as Well as the Environment

On his first trip to the Gulf to investigate the damage, he was struck by the dismay and anger of the people, something he had seen before in Alaska: "We have been very careful to look at this as not only an environmental problem, but a problem that affects people. They want to know: Are their futures in jeopardy? The more we can push governments to share information with the public, the better people can cope with what has happened. The worst thing for the community is fear of the unknown."

A telling moment came out on the water with a local fishing guide, no longer working because of fishery closures. "As I watched a flock of sandpipers feeding along a bank, standing in water covered with a

sheen of oil," recalls Senner, "he talked of his love of making a living on the Gulf, and the beauty of the marshes. The fact is, we need to restore the people as well as the environment."

Sharing Lessons Learned

One of Ocean Conservancy's immediate steps was to produce a paper on lessons learned from the *Exxon Valdez*. The insight-filled document went viral, passed along by those in local and federal government, scientific communities, and the media. Senner and Takahashi-Kelso also called on decision makers to share their experience. Senner emphasizes that Ocean Conservancy's impact has been significant: "We have played a very important role in encouraging the government to have an aggressive science program, and also to be transparent with the public about what they are doing. The governments aren't doing as much as we would like, but they are doing more than they would have done without us pushing them."

"I'm not sure that the response in the Gulf is going better than the response in Alaska did," Senner observes. "It is pretty evident that the federal government damage assessment is limited by the staff capacity they have to carry it out. On the science and restoration side of things, it is disappointing that we've not fully embraced the lessons learned. Fortunately, we know much more about the Gulf environment than we knew about Prince William Sound, and with studies underway we hope to have a more complete picture for the

Gulf. That's important because now we have the chance to learn from the comparison of spills in two strikingly different environments, the frigid waters of subarctic Prince William Sound and the warm waters of the subtropical Gulf."

The Great Unknown

Some of the impacts were not as bad as we feared, says this experienced scientist. "For example, the number of acres of coastal marshes seriously oiled could have been far worse. On the other hand, there is still so much we don't know, particularly concerning life in the deeper water, which is where most of the oil and dispersant stayed. We're hopeful that things are not as bad as they might have been—but there are still more questions than answers at this point."

Seeking answers, Ocean Conservancy is tracking how creatures like shrimp and brown pelicans are faring in the spill's aftermath. And Senner and his colleagues have written a white paper that "describes what the Gulf ecosystem looks like right now, how it works, and what different sources of stress are; oil is only one of those. This knowledge is a necessary foundation for a restoration program going forward, and we haven't seen anyone else stepping up and doing that."

For the casual observer, out-of-sight can mean out-of-mind. Ocean Conservancy's team in the Gulf reaches out every day to help the public remain mindful that, just because the oil slick on the surface has dissipated and we're no longer

seeing wildlife coated in oil, the crisis has not passed. Indeed, oil is still washing up on beaches. "Ocean Conservancy is also here to remind everyone that there is still oil and dispersant in the marine environment, and we can't forget the ocean in the restoration effort; we need both marine and coastal restoration. We're the strongest voice with that message," says Senner.

As the story continues to unfold, more will come to light about immediate and possible long-term impacts. In the coming year, says Senner, "the restoration planning process will pick up steam, and that's an opportunity for people who care about the ocean to focus a spotlight on the Gulf of Mexico and what it will take to restore it, not only from the spill, but also from decades of environmental degradation."

"With many chapters in this story still ahead, I invite our members to stay tuned and remain engaged. With their support, we'll continue our day-by-day work on the ground and on the water, and we'll be sure to continue to report back to them."

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Director of Conservation Science,
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16 The cap on the well is finally sealed for good with no more recorded oil gushing. Ocean Conservancy President and CEO Vikki Spruill says,

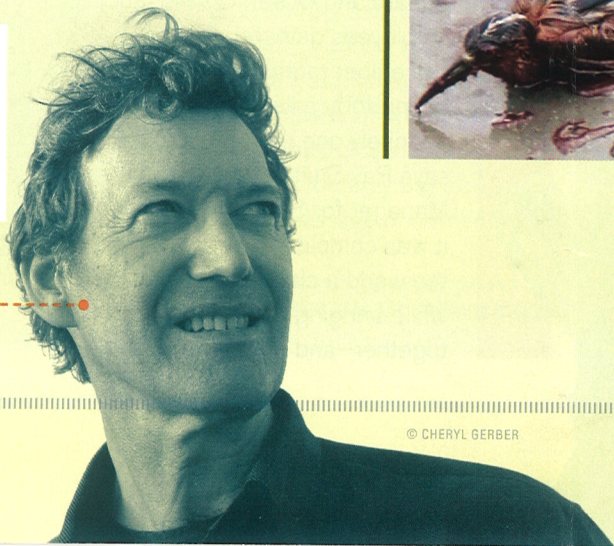
“BUT MAKE NO MISTAKE, THE HARD WORK IS JUST BEGINNING.”



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11 The National Oil Spill Commission delivers its final investigative report, calling for systemic changes in offshore drilling activity, and for funding and resources to be allocated to entities and projects than can fulfill Gulf restoration needs.

SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY 2011
28 Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus delivers to President Obama the report "America's Gulf Coast: A Long Term Recovery Plan after the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill" calling for region-wide, comprehensive restoration of the Gulf Coast. 29 The Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) restoration planning process begins. Public NRDA meetings are held throughout the five Gulf states over the next few months. 27 September 27-28 Ocean Conservancy's Dennis Takahashi-Kelso and Stan Senner testify before the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling.	5 President Obama signs an executive order establishing the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, which he charges with developing a Gulf restoration strategy that goes beyond damage from the BP disaster. The Task Force's first public meeting is held November 8, 2010 in Pensacola, Florida.	5 Damage to Gulf coral reef is documented near the BP oil disaster site.	2 Ocean Conservancy officially opens the Gulf Restoration Center in New Orleans. The new program focuses on the response to the BP disaster and helps push for full restoration of the Gulf of Mexico. “OCEAN CONSERVANCY HAS MAINTAINED A STRONG COMMITMENT TO IMPROVING THE HEALTH OF THE GULF OF MEXICO FOR OVER 20 YEARS. THE OPENING OF THE GULF RESTORATION CENTER IS A REDOUBLING OF THESE EFFORTS,” says Ocean Conservancy's Chris Dorsett.	Time—and science—will tell when it comes to long-term wildlife impacts. The striking numbers for wildlife recovered or found dead in the wake of the BP blow-out include members of about a hundred bird species, including brown pelicans and even a barn owl. Actual totals are likely much higher, because many carcasses went uncounted when they sank in the Gulf, were scavenged by sharks or other predators, or remained hidden deep in marshes.



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