

Destruction of the Gulf Coast Treasure? What Happens Next?

Waters, white sand beaches, fertile coastal marshes...

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Recently we met with Captain Louis Skrmetta who runs Ship Island Excursions out of Gulfport, Mississippi. His father Pete came to the US from Croatia in 1904, and began working as an oyster fisherman, now an [endangered endeavor](#). From that background arose the family business of ferrying people out to West Ship Island, which is part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore, about an hours boat ride south of Gulfport.



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"Normally you see a couple of hundred boats out here," Captain Louis tells us as we take in the beautiful view from the wheelhouse of his ship. "But now you can't fish. You can get a ticket now just for having fishing gear on your boat."



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The Gulf Islands are considered a Gulf Coast treasure. These sparkling blue waters, white sand beaches, and fertile coastal marshes were designated a National Seashore in 1971 to protect the wildlife, barrier islands, and archeological sites along the Gulf of Mexico. They are home to fiddler crab, shrimp, flounder, oysters, blue crab, brown pelicans, osprey, great blue heron, raccoon, loggerhead sea turtle, Florida Pompano, shark, and hundreds of species of birds and fish. And now they are being oiled. All this life, along with the humans

like Captain Louis who love this area and are deeply rooted to it, are in jeopardy.

"Normally we take out full boats this time of year," Captain Louis explains while steering us southwards, "That means 500 people per load." He shows the days totals, which are 93 from this morning's load, and 128 on the boat right now. If it weren't for several fraternity groups on board, he says "We'd be looking at 20-30 people."

Like all the other businesses that rely on the Gulf for their livelihood, Captain Louis is fixated on the oil disaster. He points south and says, "There's a huge vortex of oil swirling around out there just off the shelf in the deeper water, and each storm will keep pushing the oil up here, so we'll have a never ending supply."

He points to clean-up boats that are buzzing around nearby Cat Island, and tells us how that island has been hit by oil, as has his beloved Ship Island. He has been hired by the US Environmental Services, who chartered one of his boats to transport clean-up crews to Ship Island where they walk around digging tar balls out of the beaches. "That's helping us some," he says, trying to explain how, for now, his business is staying afloat. He, like other Gulf-dependent businesses, has no idea what will happen when that contract ends, or when the oil will stop gushing from the Macondo well.

As we near the island, Captain Louis tells us of how when a couple of weeks ago when the islands were hit with a particularly heavy load of oil, they found an oiled pelican. "We called BP's number, both me and a park ranger, to report it. The next day I was out with passengers and the bird was still there." Fortunately, a local reporter was on his ship that day and filmed the bird. "The next day we had 20 rangers out here. But the thing is, we here in Mississippi had 70 days to prepare for this thing, because it took longer to arrive here than over in Louisiana. But our illustrious governor, Haley Barbour, keeps downplaying this thing. But we know how Haley works, "If you want it, you pay Haley, and you get it."

A little about Barbour from [sourcewatch](#):

"Barbour is the Republican Governor of Mississippi. He was formerly a tobacco industry lobbyist based in Washington, D.C. His lobbying firm made \$17,150/month plus expenses from R.J. Reynolds in 2000. Barbour won the Mississippi gubernatorial election on November 4, 2003, in part on a pledge to keep Mississippi's state flag design intact, which contains a miniature representation of the Confederate battle flag. While campaigning, he also appeared at a fund-raiser sponsored by the Conservative Citizen's Council. The CCC is a modern-day version of the White Citizen's Councils that fought racial integration throughout the South in the 1950s and 60s."

Barbour, an errand-boy for the oil and gas industry, said this when the first giant rafts of oil began washing ashore on the coast of Mississippi and the Gulf Islands: "We have had a few tar balls but we have had tar balls every year, as a natural product of the Gulf of Mexico. 250,000 to 750,000 barrels of oil seep into the Gulf of Mexico through the floor every year. So, tar balls are no big deal."

Captain Louis later explained to me how their "illustrious governor" had tried to drill for oil and gas all around the Gulf Islands National Seashore by sneaking legislation into a Tsunami Relief bill.

As we travel further east along the Gulf coast, I am seeing that it is common knowledge that

the so-called Vessels of Opportunity program set up by BP where they hire local fishermen and workers to use their boats for oil recovery, is a bit of a joke, as well as about as effective as a train wreck.



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“BP is leasing 15’ boats with 50 horsepower motors, and paying them \$1600 a day to run around in circles,” Captain Louis says while pointing to a few off our bow that appear to be doing just that. Last week Erika and I saw some of this down south of Venice, Louisiana on a boat trip – a few guys hanging out in their airboat, wearing the bright orange vests required by BP, and their hard hats, lounging in the shade, drifting about.

As we near the dock of Ship Island, Captain Louis concludes his discussion about Big Oil with this: “I want to see us get completely off oil and transition into something else. Something safe. Something renewable. But the oil companies don’t want change. The Mississippi Sound used to be one of the most fertile fishing areas anywhere. And now look what we are having to deal with. We’re worried how long this will last. 300 million liters of oil in the water column. Where will it go? What happens now? The ecology of the Mississippi Sound...it’s an estuary for shrimp, mullet, crab, flounder, and all these things are part of our culture and youth. And now it’s never going to be the same again.”

Captain Louis expertly guides the ship towards the pier, where we are tied off. His family has had the concession with the National Park Service here since 1971, to be the ferry, long after his father, who began the business, began taking people out to this island in 1926. Captain Louis is carrying on a family legacy.

He walks with us along the boardwalk onto the island. I’m taken by the beauty – a bull shark chases mullet near the pier, seagulls call overhead, green marsh grass rises out of white sand, and in other places out of shallow pools to sway in the winds.



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010

“I’m worried about hurricanes,” Captain Louis says when he sees us taking in the beautiful marsh in the middle of the small island, “What’s the action plan for when a hurricane dumps oil all over this marsh?”



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010

He goes on to explain his deep concern about how his very livelihood is threatened. “This is a family operation, and how we’ve survived all these years. It’s a tough way to make a living, and we’ve survived hurricanes, but this is gonna be a tough one. Who’s going to want to come out here? We’ve never had to deal with this, it’s a whole new experience. The charter boats are all wiped out. What’s going to happen? It’s scary. Everybody is working for BP now, so what happens next?”

Another common thread of my experience here is being amidst so much raw natural beauty and wonderfully warm people whilst simultaneously processing this growing catastrophe.

The island is so beautiful I am taken aback.



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010



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Yet as we near the southern shore, the unnaturalness of the oil response effort jolts me back into the catastrophe end of the spectrum of this experience. An oil clean up crew is shoveling tar balls into bags just down the beach, their foremen drive past us in their little motorized carts, and a newly erected platform stands offshore – as a staging area for oil response vessels.



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010

A sign is posted by the National Park Service warns visitors: “Leave the area if you experience difficulty breathing or any other symptoms. If needed, contact your doctor.” If residents of the Gulf Coast region were really given this warning, en masse, by the federal government, most of the population of southeast Louisiana would [already be evacuated](#).



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010

Captain Louis takes Erika further down the beach where she photographs tar balls that are contrasted with the purity of the white sands they contaminate.



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010

I talk with one of the National Park Service lifeguard’s of the area, Matt Fields. He points to a tug-boat anchored off shore. “That’s a spray down boat,” he informs, “It sprays off skimmers coming back in. So where’s that oil go?”

He looks at me and holds up his hands, and we both shake our heads. “The oil disaster has killed the numbers of people that come here,” he adds, “We used to have well over 1,000 every day, now we count in the dozens.”

We don’t stay too long on the island before we’re back in the wheelhouse with Captain Louis heading back for Gulfport. He talks more about the oil industry, corruption, politics, and Haley Barbour. “We must end our dependence on oil, but the oil industry is literally fighting change,” he says, “There is no question this type of oil disaster will happen again. But isn’t it enough incentive to introduce change when the entire regional seafood industry has been destroyed? As oil keeps coming in here in this shallow water and mixing with the sediment, this’ll be a disaster area. What happens then with these fish and shrimp nurseries?”



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010

As we pull back into dock, Captain Louis calls over his friend Tony Smith. Tony, 66-years-old, is a fisherman who has been making the trip to Ship Island with Captain Louis on a near-daily basis. "I used to come out here 4-5 days a week to fish," he explains, "I'd feed my family, and Captain Louis' family, and a lot of these other folks."

Nobody is allowed to fish now, as oil is dominant and has, of course, already contaminated the food chain. "This is unbelievable and the worst is yet to come," says Tony as we are being tied up to the dock, "I've gone all over Mississippi looking for a place to fish, but haven't found it."

Tony is worried that all the rainwater is contaminated, he's worried about the fish, and all the sheen that he keeps seeing come into his area. Like most everyone we meet, he is, of course, angry at those who caused his life to crumble. "The worse this gets," he says, "The worse it seems people with a little power seem to mess it up even worse."

He tells me he isn't going to give up, that he's going to keep fighting, because, "It's what we do. Hell, we still have people down here still fighting the Civil War."

I watch him look out into the Mississippi Sound, to the barrier islands, at our boat, then at me, before he says, "I haven't fished since they shut these waters down. I've got a freezer full of fish, but once that's gone, I'm afraid that's it."

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