

Overwhelmed by Oil and Toxic Pollutants: The Destruction of an Entire Coastline

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“The sea that bares her bosom to the moon;

The winds that will be howling at all hours ...

For this, for everything, we are out of tune.” (William Wordsworth, 1770-1850.)

For the people of the Gulf and the region – watching some of the most toxic pollutants known to man, being sprayed to disperse one of the most toxic pollutants known to man, unleashed as a result of man’s fallibility, in a near-global addiction to consumerism – it must be an environmental apocalypse now. One dispersant Corexit 9500, is four times as toxic as oil, and also disrupts the reproductive systems of organisms.

There is magic about those sun-sparkled coasts, translucent, shimmering, sapphire sea, later turning peach, apricot, deep blush, then seeming near blackberry as the sun falls and the dusk, then dark, takes over. Then the great pelicans sit sentry, on remains of old breakwaters, silhouetted against the moon’s silvered light.

An all time memory is of the Mexican coast on the Gulf. One day remains apart, on some special mental shelf for treasures, oft taken down, wondered at, minutely re-savoured. Four of us hired a boat for the day, the others wanted to fish for marlin, I to relish the glittering ocean and sun. Lying below the little open wheelhouse, the old, toothless boatman and I quickly formed a bond. His boat was his life, he was an extension of it and it of him. His eyesight was phenomenal. “Look, look”, he’d say, pointing somewhere into the distant horizon: “tuna ..” I could see nothing, but a few miles towards the spot, sure enough, the ocean boiled and churned with the great shoal.

Shark fins often glided along side the boat, their sleek elegance visible below the surface.

Another: “look ..”, a pointed, gnarled finger, and there would be the unmistakable spout from a whale, then a great, seemingly ocean-shuddering, roll or two. The Gulf hosts twenty nine marine mammal species, alone, including blue, beaked, fin, dwarf sperm and humpback whale. On 16th June, the first whale, a sperm whale, was found dead off Mississippi. Whales are thought to live up to one hundred and thirty years. The July 1st issue of “Nature” reveals remains of a sperm whale in Peru, thought to be thirteen and a half million years old. The whale is also thought to possibly be the world’s oldest species. If the oil industry turns out to be the biggest threat they have ever faced, that will be quite a first.

As ever, the old man of the sea, saw the dolphins before I did : “look, look, look” they

leapt, in their joyous pairs, in perfect synchrony. As the boat neared, they surrounded it, cavorting in fours, sixes, eights, twelves, higher and higher, over and over. Attempting to capture the images, the lens appeared less than clear, then I realized it was not the lens, but the tears streaming down my face, in response to witnessing overwhelming minutes of beauty beyond imagination. Suddenly, was a certainty of feeling blessed, to understand poet John Gillespie Magee's words : "...in the sunlit silence, put out my hand, and touched the face of God."

Fifty dolphin have so far, been reported found dead. Experts estimate only one tenth of species which die will be washed up. The full toll of big oil's "collateral damage", now, previously and in the future, will likely never be known.

When my friends hauled in a huge marlin, which had fought for its life with wile and valor, the old man of the sea said again: "Look. Watch." The great creature lay in the sun, gasping on the deck, its body glittering all over, in sequin-like, opalescence. "Watch", he repeated. In seconds, the lights started to go out and the magnificent creature became just a very large, dark, lump of flesh. Killing for sport is another obscenity.

As the sun lowered, we headed for the shore. Approaching it, the boatman ("Watch...") put his arms above his head, steering with his knees. Instantly, the sky darkened with birds, appeared seemingly from no where. They called, swooped, rose, fell, circled. He leant in to the bait bucket and threw the remains, bit by bit, in to the air. Every morsel was expertly caught. Not one missed, dropped. The bucket empty, his hands went back on the wheel, the birds did a farewell fly past and departed in to the dusk. In the shallower waters shoals of vibrantly coloured fish, darted between the delicate coral reefs.

Bird species of the region include albatrosses, petrels, shearwaters, frigatebirds, cormorants, gannets, boobies, gulls, terns and skimmers. With temperatures of one hundred degrees and birds becoming oil covered, experts warn they are boiling, alive. The thick, tarry oil, absorbs the heat.

The many turtle species lay their eggs on or near the beach where they were born. Conservationists are removing eggs to unpolluted shores hundreds of miles away, where hopefully they will survive but another extraordinary natural miracle will have been severed. Four hundred and thirty two turtles have been found dead since April.

The Gulf's Loggerhead turtle's hatchlings follow the light of the moon to reach the ocean and swim to safety, away from land's predators, when they emerge from the egg. For the tiny moon followers, the ocean itself has become their ultimate predator.

In spite of the scale of this environmental death warrant, Louisiana Governor, Bobby Jindal, supports a legal action to reverse the Presidential six month moratorium on deep water drilling, in place to allow time to determine the exact cause of the spill, thus, hopefully, avoiding a repetition. Jindal views the cost in jobs as too high. Oil jobs, that is. And as the hurricane season has moved in with the great winds spreading unleashed deadly pollutants, farther and wider.

Dahr Jamail, in Louisiana, writes of a poignant, differing view. Locals have erected white crosses, each representing something loved and lost: "Family time, crabs, white trout, camping, diving, walking the dog on the beach, sea shells, sea turtles, dolphins, barbecues, shrimp, shark, sand between my toes, boogie boarding, mullet, marsh, palm trees."

(Christian Science Monitor, 22nd June 2010.) The crosses will undoubtedly multiply.

Mexico's ancient mariner was utterly in tune with his universe and all which shared it with him. A reverence a million miles from those who think only to ravage it.

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