

Toxic Dispersants Near Gulf Harm Humans and Wildlife

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Theme: [Environment](#)

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My eyes are burning as I type this. We've just returned from spending the day down in Barataria, located about an hour's drive south of New Orleans. The community of fishermen is swimming in oil. Within minutes of arriving, our eyes begin to burn and we begin to feel dizzy from airborne chemicals from the oil and dispersant.

Like most of the rest of the Louisiana estuary, the further south one drives, the more one enters a culture that lives, eats, breaths and loves the water. Moss-laden oak trees, some with trunks more than four feet in diameter, line the road in places, before quickly giving way to canals, bayous and swamps that lap against the pavement.

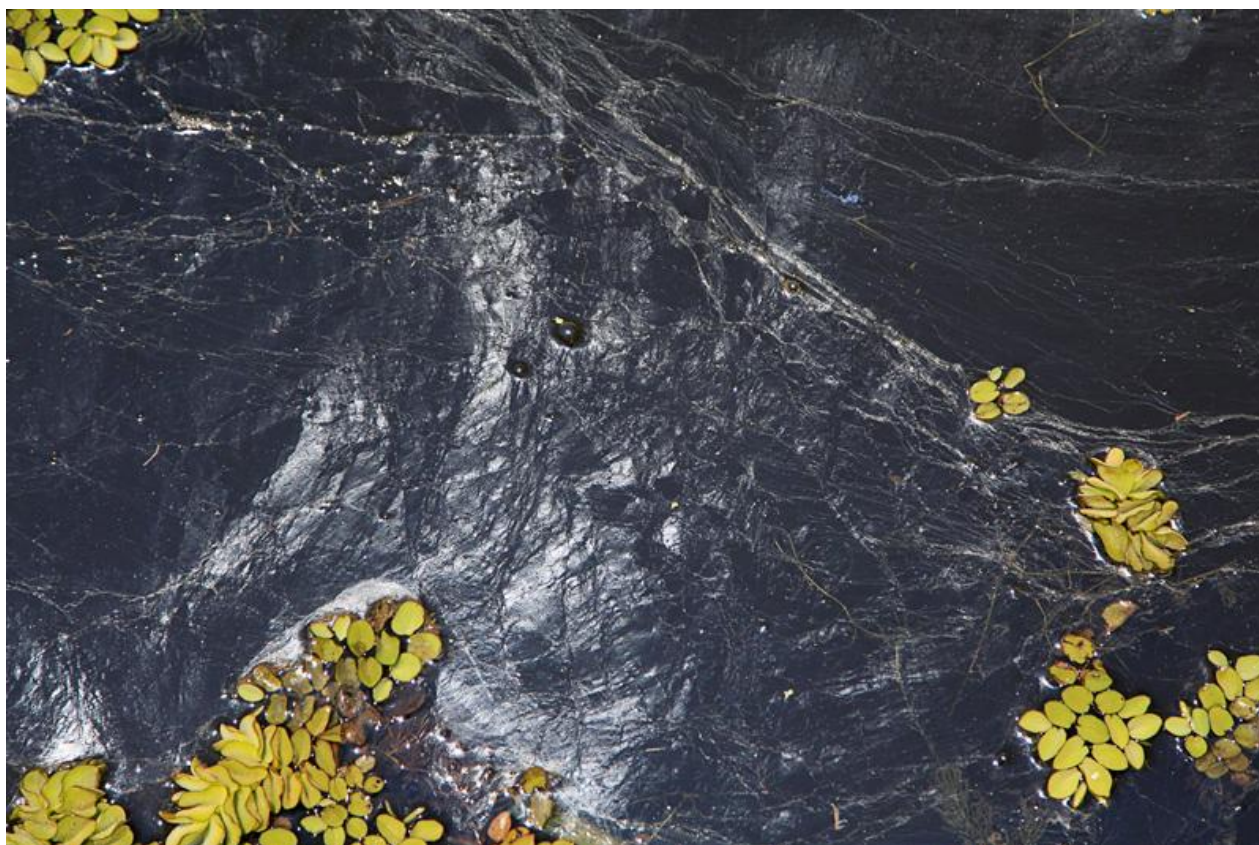


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We went to Barataria to meet with Tracy Kuhns, the executive director of [Louisiana Bayoukeeper](#), a group whose goal is "To engage and empower coastal communities for the purpose of promoting sustainable management of Coastal Louisiana's Bayou Country and its natural resources for the benefit of all citizens." Tracy, who is also a member of the

[Louisiana Shrimp Association](#), is talking rapidly before I can get my recorder started.

Tracy is concerned about the dispersant BP has been using on the oil.

The dispersants Tracy references are [Corexit 9500 and Corexit 9527](#), both of which BP has used and continues to use (more than 1,400,000 gallons to date and counting) to disperse crude oil on the surface of the Gulf of Mexico and near the wellhead 5,000 feet below the surface where the volcano of oil gushes toxicity into the Gulf. The pathways of exposure are inhalation, ingestion, skin and eye contact. Health impacts include headaches; nausea; vomiting; diarrhea; abdominal pains; dizziness; chest pains and tightness; irritation of eyes, nose, throat and lungs; difficulty breathing; respiratory system damage; skin irritation and sensitization; hypertension; central nervous system depression; neurotoxic effects; genetic damage and mutations; cardiac arrhythmia and cardiovascular damage; among several others.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) latest analysis of dispersant toxicity released in the document "Comparative Toxicity of Eight Oil Dispersant Products on Two Gulf of Mexico Aquatic Test Species," Corexit 9500, at a concentration of 42 parts per million, killed 50 percent of mysid shrimp tested.

Tracy tells us of the 44 reports for exemption [BP has been issued to use dispersant](#). She and her husband Mike, who are both fisherpersons, are tortured by what they are witnessing where they live, fish, work and play.

"Just days ago Barataria Bay was full of oil," Tracy informs us, while sweeping an arm out toward the south, where the large Bay sits, toxified, "Then they hit it with dispersants and the oil goes to the bottom. But then during the day, it heats up and the oil bubbles up to the surface."

Tracy, like many other shrimpers with whom I will soon speak, refers to this effect as that similar to a "Lava lamp."

"The oil, after they hit it with dispersants, moves around beneath the surface and they can't track it," she continues, "they are using dispersants so they can minimize their liability."

She shows us several photos and video clips on her computer. In some, a whitish foam lines marsh areas. Others show an emulsified, off-white paste floating atop water. Several times over the next hours that we talk, Tracy complains of a persistent headache she can't get rid of and feeling nauseous. She also complains of feeling "out of it" often.

Barely two hours after our arrival, I pull Erika aside. My eyes are burning with pain, I feel dizzy and lightheaded. "So are mine and so do I," she says, "And my skin burns. Look at this." She turns her head and one of her cheeks has a light-red rash.

Pressure pulses against my forehead and I can feel my heartbeat in my nose. We are both already exhibiting several symptoms of exposure to the dispersant. I'm shocked by the rapidity of the onset of symptoms.

But we're in the majority, because according to every shrimper with whom we talk today, everyone has some, or more commonly, most, of the symptoms of exposure.

Tracy, who, given her position, is up on what most of the shrimpers in the area are up to, is

as up to date on how the community is being affected as anyone. She informs us that most of the fishermen are now working for BP laying out boom. "If you're not doing this cleanup work, you're not working," she says, "They feel like they are helping by doing clean up work and they can't stand to just sit here and not do something to help. They feel helpless sitting at home and that's when the depression, suicide and drinking kick in."

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Our conversation never veers too far in another direction before it comes back to the air quality and water. This is a given, because the longer we sit with our eyes open and breathing air into our lungs, the more our eyes burn and the pulsing headache and dizziness increase.

"Bad air moves in off the bay anytime the wind is from the south or southeast," Tracy adds, "and we're trying to get BP to have air monitors on the boats of the fishermen who are helping clean up, but they won't do it." Kim Chauvin, from Chauvin, Louisiana, has gotten NOAA to put an air monitor on her husband's boat in the Gulf.

Tracy's passion for the Gulf and marine eco-systems it supports is always evident. "90 percent of the species in the Gulf of Mexico spend some part of their lives in the Louisiana estuaries," she adds, "BP is killing our hope of getting these restocked for the future."

Her concerns mirror, almost exactly, those of Paul Orr. Just a few days ago, in Baton Rouge, we visited the offices of the Lower Mississippi Riverkeeper, a group focused on keeping the lower Mississippi River pollution-free.

"This is the second most important delta in the Western Hemisphere and one of the most important deltas on the planet," Orr said during an interview, "And we just have no idea what this amount of oil in this close of proximity to the delta could do. The decision was made to use the dispersants intensively to sink the oil – the rationale to minimize shore impacts at all cost. But now it seems like the real reason they've been doing that is to get the oil to disappear because if it was staying on the surface, at least you could collect it, even if it starts impacting the shore in some way. But now we have an unknown millions of barrels of oil floating around in the water column and sticking to the sea floor. We may not ever know some of the long-term damages."

Tracy embarks on a longer explanation of the horrible timing of the BP oil disaster (as if there would ever be "better" timing) and how the massive amounts of oil and dispersant cascading into the estuary has basically annihilated much of this year's brown and white shrimp populations. She then goes on to inform us of milky, subsurface clouds of dispersed oil that have been floating around in their canals since early June and micelles comprised of oil surrounded by dispersant that turn into mist when boats pass through it. "You can't help but breathe it in when this happens," she adds, "Every time we ride out in the bay your chest tightens for days ... I still have it. And if you can smell it, you've already been overexposed. And the fish, their gills are as affected by this as our lungs are. But BP and the government keep saying they don't want to scare the public with this stuff, so they are trying to keep it quiet."

But all anyone needs to do is come down here. To Barataria, Lafitte, and numerous other small fishing communities in the marshland of southeast Louisiana. Your eyes will burn. You

will smell the oil and sheen. Your chest will tighten and your heartbeat will be felt in your head after just a few hours, tops. BP and the government cannot hide this. And it is worsening by tens of thousands of barrels of Louisiana sweet crude and untold thousands of gallons of dispersant every day.

The denials from BP, the Obama administration, the Coast Guard, and other governmental organizations like NOAA are what enrage Tracy more than anything else. In fact, BP is having response workers in Mississippi and Alabama go through metal detectors so they can't even take their cell phones out with them when they go and do their response work.

"We're living here and see this everyday. You can't tell us we don't have the BP cough that we've never had before. It makes us feel like the government thinks we are stupid little toddlers and that concerns me. They are constantly telling us not to be afraid and that is what scares the hell out of me. We shouldn't have to trade our estuary and our kid's lives to protect someone else's investment. We shouldn't have to trade ourselves."

I breach the question of what she and her husband Mike Roberts are going to do. Mike has been shrimping and crabbing here for more than 35 years. His [anguish](#) is written all over his face. They know as well as anyone how incredibly toxified their home is now. "How can anyone just leave their home and never come back again," she asks me back. "My grandson cries if he has to leave the bayou. He's been trawling since he was in diapers. This summer he's 12 and was supposed to be learning more navigation skills. Now he can't, so he's like a little lost soul."

Tracy has been working with eco-activists and fisherfolk in all five Gulf states. She says the BP catastrophe has transcended all usual barriers that usually keep people at odds with one another. "This transcends all other issues because everyone must breathe this air. We are all connected by this water. And now we're all connected by BP's oil. We all know what's going on. What planet do they live on in Washington D.C.? Not this one. They need to come here and breathe this shit everyday and swim in this soup and tell us it's just fine. All the kids around here have rashes, asthma problems, ear infections and the majority of our fishermen are out there working in this stuff 24/7 because it's now the only job in town and they're all getting sick."

Tracy is distraught. She pauses and looks out to the nearby canal, then looks back at us. "We're seeing crabs crawling out of the water. We've never seen this before. Ever. Why are crabs trying to escape from the water?"

She learned of the crabs from her friend Gene Hickman. Gene, a commercial and charter fisherman, lives with his wife Vicky a short ways down the road. Gene and Vicky come over.



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010

Gene has cancer and decided not to work for BP in the response effort so as not to make himself more sick. Gene shows me a [video](#) he took on Thursday, at night, of dozens of crabs crawling out of the canal onto his bulkhead.

I'd long since heard of the dispersant poisoning the water as well as removing oxygen from it. Many toxicologists have already stated that Corexit is much more harmful to human and marine life health than we've been told. Marine toxicologist Dr. Susan Shaw has written: "Corexit is particularly toxic. It contains petroleum solvents and a chemical that, when ingested, ruptures red blood cells and causes internal bleeding. It is also bioaccumulative, meaning its concentration intensifies as it moves up the food chain."

On July 9, in an [interview](#) with CNN, Dr. Shaw said this of the toxic soup that is the combination of oil and dispersants: "Shrimpers [were] throwing their nets into water ... [then] water from the nets splashed on [one's] skin.... [He experienced a] headache that lasted 3 weeks ... heart palpitations ... muscle spasms ... bleeding from the rectum ... And that's what Corexit does, it ruptures red blood cells, causes internal bleeding and liver and kidney damage.... This stuff is so toxic combined ... not the oil or dispersants alone.... Very, very toxic and goes right through skin."

A June 30 story in [The Guardian](#) informed us, "Scientists are confronting growing evidence that BP's ruptured well in the Gulf of Mexico is creating oxygen-depleted 'dead zones' where fish and other marine life cannot survive."

Two research voyages of independent scientists detected "what were described as 'astonishingly high' levels of methane, or natural gas, bubbling from the well site, setting off a chain of reactions that suck the oxygen out of the water." In the article, Larry Crowder, a marine biologist, said, "The animals are already voting with their fins to get away from

where the oil spill is and where potentially there is oxygen depletion. When you begin to see animals changing their distribution that is telling you about the quality of water further offshore. Basically, the fish are moving closer to shore to try to get to better water.”

Samantha Joye, a scientist at the University of Georgia studying the effects of the spill at depth, has said that the ruptured well was producing up to 50 percent as much methane and other gases as oil.

“Joye said her preliminary findings suggested the high volume of methane coming out of the well could upset the ocean food chain,” The Guardian continued, “such high concentrations, it is feared, would trigger the growth of microbes, which break up the methane, but also gobble up oxygen needed by marine life to survive, driving out other living things.

“Joye said the methane was settling in a 200-meter layer of the water column, between depths of 1,000 to 1,300 meters in concentrations that were already threatening oxygen levels.

“That water can go completely anoxic [extremely low oxygen] and that is a pretty serious situation for any oxygen-requiring organism. We haven’t seen zero-oxygen water but there is certainly enough gas in the water to draw oxygen down to zero,” she said.

“It could wreak havoc with those communities that require oxygen,” Joye said, wiping out plankton and other organisms at the bottom of the food chain.”

I’m horrified by the video. Tears well in my eyes. Gene takes one look at my face and says, “It’s not natural for crabs to come out of the water like this. They never want to come out of the water if they can help it. They are trying to escape.”

Tracy chimes in. “We are seeing this all over the Gulf now – dolphins, fish, running from the dispersant and oil because they can’t breath. Marine life knows to run out of the way, but we don’t.”

Gene tells us, “This is ripping my heart to pieces. I’m living in high anxiety.” Vicky says that BP and the government are playing down the disaster, when in reality, “anything out there should not be eaten” while pointing out to the water.

Disturbingly, the day after Gene filmed the crabs fleeing the water, residents living near Lake Pontchartrain [reported](#) finding thousands of dead fish and crabs in the canals near their homes.

We drive over to Gene and Vicky’s after they inform us of dead crabs and fish floating in sheen-covered water by their boat. Outside their mobile home, from which they are about to be [evicted](#), Gene walks us over to where his boat sits in a nearby bayou.



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010

Dead crabs float in a sheen of oil. It is a toxic soup of stench and death that fouls the air and burns my nose. As I stand looking on in horror, with more tears welling up in my eyes, Gene says, "I'm 52 years old and I've never seen crabs crawl out of the water at night. I also saw shrimp swimming in little circles on the surface."

Vicky, standing nearby, says, "I think this is just the beginning. This is just the small stuff. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Over time bigger and bigger stuff will be washing up here."

Gene looks out to the water, to nearby Bayou Rigolettes and holds back tears as he says, "I smell oil all the time. It's like it's stuck in my nose. You know why all this hits so close to home? See those crab traps?"



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010

"I guess those are relics now," Gene says. "I can't fish now and probably won't ever be able to again, so where does this leave me? I feel like that old Indian from that old commercial, who looks out at all the garbage and pollution and sees his whole world polluted. That's how I feel now."



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010

The day before, in Chalmette, Louisiana, I spoke with [Dr. Riki Ott](#). Dr. Ott is a marine toxicologist and Exxon Valdez survivor who has been monitoring BP's actions and how they are affecting what we know about the damage the oil disaster is causing and threats posed to those working in the polluted zone.

"This is a hazardous waste cleanup," she told me as we sat in the city hall chambers where she was soon to hold a public forum, "BP needs to be evacuating the Gulf coast and paying

for that, in addition to costs for relocating people and compensating them for what they've lost."

It is that serious. My eyes still burn and my chest is tight, long after we exited the toxic soup of air and water that is south of New Orleans. Toxic chemicals from dispersed oil and the dispersant itself now permeate all the air, leaves, water and wildlife of the coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and parts of Florida and Texas. You are breathing this same air as you read this.

The only question is, how many parts per million of toxics are now in your lungs as well?

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