



## Paradise Saved

By Carlota Le Boeuf, MSC

The real impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico will take years, if not decades, to discover. Each locale along the 47,000-mile long United States portion of the Gulf coast has its own story to tell. This is one of them.



Blessing the Shrimp Fleet.  
Photo credit: Alysha Jordan.



The brown pelican of the Gulf Coast searches for nesting materials.  
Photo courtesy of USFWS/Tom MacKenzie.

Between the current channel of the Mississippi River and its ancient channel, the Atchafalaya River, lies the largest estuary in North America. This web of bays, lagoons, marshes, and swamps covers more than 4 million acres and is home to approximately 735 different species of birds, fish, and other animals. To those of us humans from around here, the area is known as Terrebonne Parish.

Our French-speaking ancestors named it well: “Good Earth.” It is an area rich in cultural traditions, great seafood, natural gas and oil resources, and hard-working people who are deeply connected to the good earth and extensive waterways that sustain their families.

The Barataria-Terrebonne estuary, which forms the southern boundary of Terrebonne Parish, is an incredibly diverse and fragile ecosystem. It is a breeding ground for wildlife, seafood and 28 endangered plant and animal species. It also plays a vital role in the migration of birds and waterfowl. Unfortunately, the estuary itself is

endangered by “development,” especially that associated with oil and gas industries.



Disaster preparedness is as essential to life on the Louisiana Gulf coast as the air we breathe. The constant threat of hurricanes and tropical storms has created a network of communication and first responders that can be rapidly set in motion. When the Deepwater Horizon oil well exploded last year just fifty-two miles from the coast of Louisiana, business owners, residents, government officials and conservationists went into disaster mode.

Terrebonne Parish. Photos courtesy of United States Coast Guard. ABOVE photo credit: Isaac D. Pacheco. BELOW photo credit: Petty Officer 3rd Class Derek W. Richburg.



Initially, plans for protecting the estuary called for oil booms and sandbags, but teams of experts and volunteers soon realized this would not be the answer. The coast of the estuary does not form a solid line like a beach, which can be sifted through and cleaned. It's more like lacework in its openness and the complexity of floating soil mixed in with extensive waterways and solid ridges. Laying enough oil booms to cover the region would not be possible.

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Instead, responders decided to petition the State to open the Atchafalaya spillway to create a flow of freshwater from the Mississippi River out toward the Gulf to keep the oil at bay. While this didn't prevent oil from impacting the coast, it did stave off a lethal dose.



There are no perfect solutions in the face of disaster. Photo credit: Alysha Jordan.



Gulf Saver Bags aid in marsh habitat restoration. Photo credit: Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Dr. Alexander Kolker Ph.D. of the Louisiana Marine Consortium has been monitoring the areas where oil did wash into the backside of Barataria Bay. His investigation shows that new growth has begun in areas where the oil coated the marsh grass. Paradise saved...at least for now.

However, saving the estuary did not come without cost. The freshwater released from the spillway had an adverse effect on the area's oyster beds. While oysters can tolerate some freshwater encroachment on their habitats, the amount released flooded the area and the crop was ruined, further impacting an already depressed local economy.

Of course, the oysters would not have survived if oil had reached them either. In disasters like oil spills, there sometimes is no perfect solution. It's often a matter of trade-offs and this time, the environment trumped local economic interests. In a sequel to this article, I will explore the impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on our fishing and shrimp processing industries.



"Paradise saved ... at least for now." Photo credit: Alysha Jordan.

