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An invited comment by Liesel Ashley Ritchie and Duane Gill

As the world watches the unprecedented environmental disaster in the northern Gulf of Mexico following the April 20, 2010, explosion of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig, inevitable comparisons arise between this event and the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill (EVOS) in Alaska.

Where should we begin? Experts, local officials, activists, and laypersons on countless social networking sites are weighing in on the extent to which such comparisons are reasonable and meaningful. The most obvious - but often overlooked - difference between the two is that while no one died in the Alaska accident, 11 people were killed in the April 20 explosion. But this sad fact was soon overshadowed by the environmental damage and the economic, social, and cultural impacts associated with the Deepwater oil gusher.

The situation in the Gulf represents both an unfortunate segue and a unique opportunity to apply what we have learned about oil spill disasters. The overarching lesson we can share from our Exxon Valdez research is that the potential for negative, long-term community impacts must not be underestimated. Shortly after the tanker ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, sociologists Steven Picou and Duane Gill began to document the immediate social impacts of the oil spill on the community of Cordova, Alaska. Subsequent research throughout the 1990s studied the continuing effects of the disaster on Cordova, with an emphasis on Alaska Natives and commercial fishermen. Since 2001, the investigation has evolved to examine how the protracted litigation over punitive damages in *Exxon v. Baker* - resulting in the 2008 US Supreme Court decision - has affected the lives of individuals and groups, and influenced social capital in that community.

Coincidentally, our EVOS-related research in Alaska is in its final stages as the Deepwater Horizon well continues to spew oil. As this piece goes to press, we have just returned from conducting the last of our formal data collection and fieldwork in Cordova, where reactions there to the BP oil disaster are a powerful reminder of what is in store for residents of Gulf Coast communities in the years to come. Most folks in Cordova with whom we spoke describe flashbacks to their own experiences with the EVOS as they see television coverage of the situation in the Gulf. Said one third-generation Cordovan, “As bad as it was up here [after the EVOS], it’s gonna be way worse down there. I can’t watch it on TV. It brings back bad memories. [I’m reliving the pain all over again. It’s all roaring back.” Another fisherman adamantly pointed out as we sat eating our breakfast, “Here come the lies [from BP].” He proceeded to list the “three big lies” from Exxon: “The first lie: ‘It’s only 11 million gallons’. The second lie: ‘We will make you whole.’ The third lie: ‘Oil doesn’t sink’.” As disaster researchers turn our attention to the unfolding situation, Gulf Coast communities have an advantage over Exxon Valdez oiled communities in terms of access to a solid foundation of prior social science research in this arena. Research findings from the EVOS, other marine oil spills, and the broader body of knowledge on community impacts of natural and technological disasters offer insights about what can be expected in the immediate- and long-term. This valuable information is already being used to develop strategies to ameliorate the tragic situation for those who may be directly and indirectly touched by the Gulf Coast oil disaster.

What we know about social impacts of the EVOS

As previously discussed by Duane Gill in the November 2008 issue of the *Natural Hazards Observer*, the EVOS and related litigation have had significant impacts on Cordova and other affected areas. As a community with intimate cultural, social, and economic ties to renewable natural resources, Cordova was particularly vulnerable to the effects of environmental degradation associated with the oil spill.

Given the community’s socio-cultural relationship with the ecosystem of Prince William Sound, it is not surprising that residents initially experienced high levels of collective trauma, social disruption, economic uncertainty, community strain, and psychological stress. This was especially the case among Alaska Natives and commercial fishermen, who have particularly strong ties to renewable natural resources.

Over the years since 1989, community impacts of the EVOS have manifested as chronic collective stress, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and social disruption related to ecosystem resource losses, as well as the threat of resource loss. Research further suggests that being involved with EVOS-related litigation generated stress, anxiety, social disruption, and feelings of alienation beyond those related to the spill itself.

For individuals, groups, and communities on the Sound whose lives and culture are most closely tied to ecosystem resources, these impacts persist and have continued to negatively influence social capital. The implications of these research findings for the Gulf Coast are already apparent.

Early insights into social impacts of the Gulf gusher

The amount of oil that has been released into the Gulf of Mexico has far exceeded that of the EVOS. In some respects, this confounds comparing the two events. The scope, scale, and potential longevity of the Gulf gusher, combined with a complex regional economy tied to an environment under siege from the oil, may best be described as “catastrophic.” With that said, there are some meaningful comparisons between the two events when it comes to understanding and anticipating what Gulf Coast communities face from this catastrophe. An important similarity is that communities, groups, and individuals that are economically, socially, and culturally tied to damaged or threatened resources are most vulnerable. The timing of the Deepwater Horizon rig blowout is reminiscent of the grounding of the Exxon Valdez. Both happened in the spring (April 20 and March 24, respectively) - the most biologically productive season of the year. This is not only disruptive to commercial and subsistence fishing prospects, but to long-held cultural traditions, as well. This upheaval of lifestyles is already emerging in significant, negative ways along the Gulf of Mexico - just as it did for years after the EVOS.

The environmental damage associated with the Gulf event has the potential to generate long-term resource loss for commercial and subsistence fishermen and shrimpers along the coast. This, too, resonates with the ongoing experiences of Alaskans, who since 1994 have yet to see the herring biomass return to a level where harvesting is viable. Perhaps a similar fate awaits shrimp, oysters, and certain species of fish on which many Gulf Coast residents rely. In the BP gusher, the oil threatens many more industries and user groups along the northern Gulf including recreational fishing, tourism, and other enterprises tied to beaches, land, and other natural resources. There are already observations of high levels of uncertainty and anxiety among area residents in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida as a result of the BP disaster. This individual and collective stress is likely to lead to increases in intergroup conflict, domestic disturbance, depression, and alcohol and drug abuse. One suicide - that of charter boat captain Allen Kruse - has already been directly linked to the BP situation. The emerging toll on mental health among Gulf Coast residents suggests the potential for similar tragedies.

Early reports of such social disruption are plentiful

Over time, empirical research and formal statistics will undoubtedly bear out these narratives. Both the EVOS and the BP oil disasters highlight issues of recreancy (blame) and loss of trust in corporations and government that is characteristic of human-caused or technological disasters. In the case of the Deepwater Horizon, this is evident as frustration and anger over accountability, lack of transparency, and finger-pointing continue to escalate along the coast and in Washington, DC. BP's down playing of the amount of oil being released is also consistent with Exxon's approach beginning in 1989 and continuing through today. This corporate posturing sets the stage for BP to attempt to minimize responsibility for the resulting environmental, social, and economic damages.

With its pronouncements to pay "legitimate" claims and to make survivors "whole," BP has followed the Exxon playbook since immediately after the Deepwater Horizon rig blowout. President Obama's remarks that escrow funds in the amount of \$20 billion represent "an important step towards making the people of the Gulf Coast whole again" does not instill a lot of confidence among those who lived through the EVOS. As one Cordovan recently put it: "That's lawyer speak for 'we're going to pay out as little as possible.'" As with the EVOS, there is a strong likelihood of long-term, high-stakes litigation for Gulf Coast residents that could eventually be as stressful as the initial disaster itself.

This goes hand-in-hand with long-term, chronic social impacts we can expect to occur, just as with the EVOS. The advice of one Alaskan fisherman to his counterparts on the Gulf Coast: "Make yourself whole ... Don't rely on the oil company to do so." He added that for those who counted on Exxon, the legal system, and the government to make them whole, "the suffering [has been] unbearable." The use of controversial clean-up techniques and strategies in the Gulf parallels EVOS. Among these issues are worker safety, dispersant use, lack of cleanup equipment, and a shortage of trained personnel to use that equipment.

According to accounts from Alaskans with training and experience in oil spill response, what they're seeing on the Gulf Coast is entirely inadequate and in many cases, inappropriate. As one woman explained, "I saw a photo of some boom being towed with water and oil [flowing] over and under it. That's useless. You can't tow it that fast." Other Cordovans we've spoken with express similar dismay, but hopefully this can be remedied as Alaskans and others are now headed to the Gulf to help train locals in effective skimming and booming techniques. The influx of clean-up workers into affected communities is another point of comparison. "Boomtown effects," including substantial increases in local populations and the accompanying demands on the physical and social infrastructures of these communities, pose additional challenges that will last at least as long as the gusher continues.

The aforementioned similarities suggest that in many ways, what is happening to communities on the Gulf Coast is what many Alaskan communities experienced after the EVOS. As a commercial fisherman in Cordova put it, "It's exactly what happened to us - yet people seem surprised at the way things are unfolding."

There is another interesting dynamic emerging, as described by a Cordova community leader who recounted recent conversations with people on the Gulf Coast: "People in Louisiana were telling me that they see folks in Alabama and Florida experiencing what they [in Louisiana] experienced two weeks earlier. There's just a lag time. I told her, 'Honey, you're where we were 21 years ago.'"

Important points of departure

With all of that said, there are and will continue to be significant differences between the BP and the EVOS disasters. Broadly speaking, most of the distinctions we can expect to see with respect to short- and long-term social impacts in the Gulf are a direct result of the size and geographic scope of the disaster. More oil equals the befouling of more ecosystems and developed coastline, as well as impacts on far more communities, more people, and more primary and secondary businesses than the EVOS. The fact that two months after the explosion, oil, methane, and other materials are still flowing from the Deepwater Horizon at rates estimated from between 56,000 barrels and 84,000 barrels per day add to the uncertainty about the extent of damages and when the disaster event can be declared over and recovery can truly begin. While the amount of oil on the Exxon Valdez tanker was known and finite (although figures about the amount actually spilled are still contested), the amount in the BP spill is unknowable. Although the size of oil reserves in the Gulf is not technically infinite, oil from the Deepwater Horizon could continue to leak for years, even decades. As if that were not enough, there are additional concerns about even more geographically far-reaching impacts in the event of a hurricane or tropical storm in the Gulf of Mexico spreading the oil to Texas or further inland as a result of storm surges.

Early public responses to the rig explosion further suggest greater levels of perceived complicity and corruption between BP and the former Minerals Management Service - now the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation, and Enforcement - than there was in the Exxon Valdez grounding. Based on more than 20 years of data regarding attitudes toward government, big business, and the US legal system in the context of the EVOS, we know that beliefs about trust and blame are related to frustration, anger, alienation, and stress. In this milieu, we can expect these outcomes to escalate over time among Gulf Coast residents.

Another critical distinguishing feature for Gulf Coast residents as they deal with the current disaster is that many are still recovering from the 2005 hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, as well as Ivan in 2004. In several respects, communities damaged by these storms are dealing with the cumulative impacts of a number of disasters, exacerbated by the current global economic crisis. The looming threat of hurricane season represents an additional, significant source of uncertainty. These stressors take a toll on various forms of community capital, including financial, human, social, built, political, natural, and cultural.

Combined, the aforementioned distinctions of the circumstances in the Gulf illuminate the immediate need for expanded mental health resources along the Gulf Coast.

The suicide of Captain Kruse has served as an early wakeup call for local providers to establish mental health safety nets.

One of the positive distinctions between the EVOS and the BP situations is the fact that the location of the Deepwater Horizon rig in the Gulf of Mexico and the 24-hour video streaming of the gusher means that the disaster is more visible to the general public and that more people have direct access to the affected areas to witness the situation first-hand. The Internet, with its media outlets, blogs, and social networking sites, also affords opportunities for dissemination of information that were not readily available in 1989 when the EVOS occurred. As they observe the events on the Gulf Coast, those who experienced the direct effects of the EVOS in the relatively remote area of Prince William Sound consider this a good thing. As they see it, because the Gulf of Mexico is in the proverbial front yard of millions of people, it will not be so easily dismissed as the EVOS has been.

Potential for knowledge transfer

Because more is known about social impacts of marine oil spills now than was the case in 1989, there is opportunity to bring this expertise to bear in support of Gulf Coast residents. Coastal communities from Louisiana to Florida have local knowledge and disaster-related experiences from recent hurricanes. Although policy makers and bureaucracies tend to have short memories, the importance of the latter should not be overlooked.

In Louisiana, especially, the grass-roots capacity to deal with post-disaster social issues has advanced in the aftermath of Katrina. This can be adapted and expanded to assist communities in neighboring states as the oil spreads along the coast. A recent visitor from Alaska to the Gulf Coast encouraged residents there to “Find their own voices, their own local champions” and to not rely on outsiders to do it for them.

Based on their experiences during the past 21 years following the EVOS, the people of Prince William Sound are providing insights to Gulf Coast residents about what to expect as the BP tragedy unfolds. For example, the community guidebook to coping with technological disasters developed for the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens’ Advisory Council is being used in Gulf of Mexico communities.

Several individuals from Prince William Sound have spent time in Gulf of Mexico communities and talked with local officials and informal leaders. Further, the sharing of information and support via social networking sites and blogs is also prevalent (Alaskan Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Survivors in Solidarity with the Gulf Coast).

At the very least, with effective information dissemination, residents of Gulf Coast communities should have a better idea of what to expect. They will be in a position to seek assistance and to develop coping strategies appropriate for their local contexts.

What’s next?

The experience in the aftermath of the EVOS - and Hurricane Katrina - further highlights that dealing with this catastrophe will be a marathon. Twenty-one years post-EVOS, individuals, groups, and communities are still coping with the aftermath of that disaster. Some people have moved on from the event, but for others, closure on this disaster will only occur when they die.

The overwhelming nature of the unfolding catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico leaves many wondering what, if anything, can be done. Out of every challenge rises opportunity and seeking these prospects is an important first step. First, there is an opportunity to use this event to re-examine our current energy policies and move toward a more rational policy based on renewable energy sources.

This calls for self-examination of our individual lifestyles and roles in contributing to our society’s addiction to petroleum. Research is needed to provide sound information to policy makers and decision makers, as well as to voters, on what policies are best to pursue. There is also an opportunity to re-examine our ideas of coastal resilience.

Although considerable effort has gone into understanding coastal resilience in the wake of recent hurricanes, less attention has been given to human-triggered threats like a deepwater oil gusher.

As for Gulf Coast residents, studies are needed that will enhance understanding of what is happening to them and their communities and help to diminish negative social impacts of this catastrophe. To date, findings of disaster-related research have demonstrated that many negative impacts reflect diminished social capital - loss of trust, perceptions of recreancy, lack of reciprocity, avoidance behaviors, internal strife and conflict, and decline in civility.

For coastal communities along the Gulf of Mexico, potential for loss of social capital is related to anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity brought about by environmental degradation. What Gulf Coast residents are experiencing is very familiar to many people who have survived other technological disasters. It is crucial to help those being affected by the BP catastrophe to understand that they are not alone and to push decision makers to provide financial and human resources to address the

growing need for social support. Moreover, it is important to study and document the successes and shortcomings of formal and informal responses to this event.

Perhaps most importantly, we must remember to support coastal communities in the Gulf over the long term. Although considerable attention is currently focused on the catastrophe, this nation - indeed, the world - tends to have a short attention span driven largely by whatever interests the media. Although obsessing over the situation is not recommended, keeping it in mind is necessary. Complacency, as we have seen, is dangerous. For residents of the Gulf Coast, the journey beyond this most recent disaster will be a long one. On that note, in preparing for this marathon, a former mayor of Cordova advises people on the Gulf Coast: "Get away from the TV set. Love your family. Take care of one another. Get rest. The disaster will wait. Children need to be hugged. Do some normal things, have friends over for iced tea. Do not become obsessed with the lies and ugliness. It isn't healthy."

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For more information and references related to the Deepwater Horizon oil disaster refer to www.colorado.edu/hazards/oilspill_deepwater.html

(Extracted from Natural Hazards Observer, July 2010.)