

Oil Tanker Spill Leaves Rhode Island with an Ecological Disaster

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On Jan. 21 (1997) at 5 a.m., the sound of an approaching tug penetrated the cold and dark on Moonstone Beach. There in the dunes, a man watched the tug approach and depart.

The sun slowly rose over the black hulks of the Scandia and North Cape. The waves continued to pound shore and ships. Shellfish continued to wash ashore. Every so often a bird would emerge from the breakers, struggling against tide and waves, but with feathers drenched in oil, and then disappear into the waves.

The oil continued to flow from the Scandia and North Cape. On Jan. 19, at 2:31 p.m., a fire broke out on the Scandia, a tug, operating in very rough weather, which was hauling the barge North Cape and four million barrels of light petroleum off the coast of Rhode Island. By 6 p.m. that night, the Scandia and the barge North Cape were abandoned and drifting. Both vessels were beached by the storm.

The rocky seabed in eight feet of water fractured Nine out of eleven major containment compartments of the North Cape. The tug Scandia, with 84,000 gallons of fuel, was also leaking oil.

Environmental groups are calling for a complete investigation of this catastrophe. Critical of the process which allows toxic chemical industries to operate on rough seas, questions have also been raised about state and federal emergency response capabilities, and a lack of reporting by the media. But even as the obvious toll to wildlife and the ecology mounts, many of the devastating effects of toxic pollution will go unseen.

At Rhode Island's Matunick beach, at 11:30 p.m. on Jan. 20, almost 36 hours into the disaster, there were no flashers, no emergency containment operation in progress. Two police cruisers guarded the access road to Moonstone Beach, where the tug Scandia and the barge North Cape were beached by human ignorance and omnipotent nature. On Matunick Beach, half a mile up the coast from Moonstone, the seaboard was dark and – but for the crash of the surf – silent.

At the local Joyce's pub, the proprietor snarled about the rescue operations.

“It’s all political,” he said, “Political posturing and corporate maneuvering. Even Hillary Clinton [then in Providence] took the opportunity to fly over for publicity purposes. They could easily have driven trucks down the shore and pumped both those ships out. But nothing happened today, all day. This place was swarming with people. There must have been 2000 people out on the beach.”

The evidence of that was on the beach. Immature lobsters lay stilled where the surf left them. The white, sinewy flesh of eviscerated clams littered the shore as if dumped. There were dead birds and fish. Starfish by the thousands.

Extending some three miles out to sea, carried by currents and an offshore breeze, the slick was quickly churned beneath the surface to penetrate all layers of the aquatic water system. Vessels ran aground just 50 yards from a marker designating the nesting grounds of the endangered piping plover. Birds could be seen feeding on contaminated wildlife. Thus, while the oil ostensibly dispersed, evaporated in air and diluted by sea, the contamination will penetrate the food chain deeply.

It is one of New England’s worst disasters in maritime history – threatening tourism, poisoning fishing and lobster industries and contaminating sensitive ecological coastlands. The disaster and subsequent response reflects the current social, environment and regulatory climate in the U.S., raising major questions about emergency preparedness, public health and welfare and environmental protection. The catastrophe also raises questions about energy industry pollution, waste and toxic spillage – historically widespread and well-documented.

“Just one more devastating example of the need to develop alternative and clean energy,” said Jonathan Snelling of Mass ALERT (Massachusetts Alliance to Limit and Eliminate Radioactive Trash). “I saw distressed birds, obviously coated in oil, struggling to survive. Maybe they collected 58 birds and 18 of them died, but there’s a lot more going on there that will never be seen. And we’re running out of time to save our environment from total destruction.”

In Rhode Island, officials initially downplayed the potential threat and the media reported accordingly.

Early in the evening on Jan. 20, although immediately preceded by Boston TV-5 reports showing oil-soaked birds and dead lobsters from “a spill of at least 700,000 gallons” of toxins, ABC TV subsequently reported “a situation under control” which “could have been a major environmental disaster.”

Rhode Island area news, like *The Providence Journal-Bulletin*, reported early that “it could have been much worse” and that “[Coast Guard, state and federal officials] were upbeat.”

Even after at least 700,000 gallons of highly toxic and volatile home-heating oil had contaminated the sensitive coastal environment, certain officials continued to downplay the incident.

The failure to adequately assess the potential threat and respond accordingly to minimize damage is reflected by the remarks of Federal Transportation Secretary Federico Pena. “Earlier we thought there was no spill,” he said, on Saturday. “Then we learned oil was leaking and we realized we had a much more serious incident. But we have been a bit lucky because there hasn’t been an extensive leak of the product [oil].”

When the potential for up to four million gallons of toxic releases soon became clear, officials nonetheless pursued a disaster response strategy dependent on decisions of industry and salvage operators, a strategy perhaps determined more by financial or political considerations than public and environmental health and welfare. And official, like Coast Guard Captain Barney Turlo, continued to voice “hopefully optimistic” sentiments.

While energy industries routinely operate in hostile, unrelenting environments like Siberia, the North Sea and Alaska, Rhode Island operations were “restricted by savage wind and seas.” Even as weather subsided, however, efforts to secure the barge and contain the flow of toxins into the environment had failed.

The Providence Sunday Journal reported that: “some bystanders [Saturday] questioned why the tug and barge were operating in Block Island Sound during such a fierce storm, and why they didn’t see an aggressive salvage effort [taking place].”

Coast Guard Captain Barney Turlo said a fire caused the grounding, not the weather. “Vessels go in and out in all kinds of nasty weather,” he told the *Sunday Journal*. “It’s a judgment call of the [harbor] master.

Attributing the disaster to the tug fire ignores the evidence that bad weather was certainly a major and subsequent factor, limiting Coast Guard and industry response to the fire.

Emergency response operations were hampered, according to salvage and coast guard officials, by high seas and stormy weather. William Howard, a worker for the oil-spill specialists Clean Harbors, claimed there was no way to contain the oil until the storm subsided. According to the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, on Jan. 20, particles of oil, “riding gale-force winds,” spread quickly through nearby South Kingstown crating “a film of oil covered cars, clothes, cameras and people.”

“It’s toxic and it will quickly kill anything that it meets,” said U.S. Fish & Wildlife Biologist Tom Halavik, who reported blue crabs, Jonah crabs, sand crabs and sea turtle amongst the carnage. Department of Environmental Management Officials, on the 20th, tried to record some measure of the catastrophe: DEM biologists David Borden, Arthur Ganz and April Valliere recorded some 157 dead lobsters per square meter of beach. They also noted that the toxins did not discriminate: adult, juvenile and baby lobsters were all decimated.

Breeding grounds for shellfish and fish, and Atlantic flyway for millions of migratory wildfowl, including osprey, mergansers, grebes, eiders, loons and rare harlequin ducks, the Narragansett

area beaches are part of a delicate necklace of eight saltwater beach ponds which stretch from Narragansett to Westerly, R. I.

Breached to the sea by saltwater channels, the ponds and the sea are dependent on the tides. Thus oil spills can easily contaminate the tidal aquatic systems. Offshore are tidal shoals which support huge populations of fish, crustaceans and mollusks.

“It’s horrifying. My heart is just sinking,” said Virginia Lee, to the *Providence Journal-Sentinel*. Lee is a University of Rhode Island oceanographer who has studied, roamed and fought to preserve the ponds for more than 15 years. “An oil spill,” she said, “would be too horrifying to contemplate.”

As the tides came and went, however, the oil continued to flow through estuaries to the salt pond ecosystems.

With industry claiming that high seas once again prevented salvage operations, even as the sunset on Sunday, the North Cape continued to release oil. Pressures on the hull and containment slowed oil flows at high tide and accelerated them at low. Sunday evening news reports put the spillage at 800,000 gallons. The spill had reached the wildlife preserves on Block Island. By Monday night, the ‘ABC Evening News’ reported one million gallons had spilled.

“It’s a shame that people can’t see what’s really going on, that people can’t sufficiently respect the scale of this calamity alone,” said John Hardin of the Amherst office of New England Greenpeace.

“I saw extreme damage to the ecosystem, but no one can determine the effects of these toxins on the ocean or the marsh or the wildlife,” he said. “And we can not determine how prevalent these disasters really are. They are happening all the time, all over the world.”

Too easily forgotten, the tragedies of oil pollution are also too easily dismissed.

“In previous marine oil spills,” wrote Bruce Landis, of the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, “Rhode Island was lucky.” Since 1958, reports Landis, the Rhode Island area alone has seen some 11 major maritime petroleum industry incidents, three of which were recorded as “near-miss” no-spillers. Over one million gallons of oil were spilled in 1960; 7.6 million gallons in 1976; 290,000 in 1993. Counting this incident, with the first [Jan. 20th] spill estimate of 750,000 gallons, Landis reports eight incidents responsible for at least 10,168,960 gallons of petroleum products.