



The Prestige oil tanker disaster – the facts

BACKGROUND – WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

The *Prestige* oil tanker ran into trouble last week, 30 miles off the coast of Spain. Four thousand tonnes of fuel leaked from the tanker over the weekend. The oil has now impacted more than 200 kilometres of the Galician coast, in northern Spain. The Spanish government has suspended fishing activities along a 100-kilometre stretch of coast.

The *Prestige* sank after splitting in two in Portuguese waters. It is still carrying between 60,000 and 70,000 tonnes of heavy fuel oil. The oil is still contained within compartments in the holds of the ship. In the area where the tanker sank the water is over 3,000 metres deep.

Birds have been affected, and fisheries have been closed between Roncudo and Cape Tourinan – a stretch of 100 kilometres. The Spanish government has promised financial compensation for losses sustained by local fishermen. Whole communities depend on fishing in the area, which is famous for its shellfish, octopus and crabs.

WHAT ARE THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF OIL?

Disasters involving oil can have a significant, long-term impact on marine environments beyond the highly visible, oiled birds and the need for a clean-up operation. More than 30 years after the *Torrey Canyon* ran aground off the Isles of Scilly, some scientists consider that it is only recently that the local marine environment has recovered from the oil spill. And a ban on fishing for some shellfish remained in place for more than seven years after the *Braer* oil spill – a spill that supposedly “disappeared” in days. In Pembrokeshire, where the *Sea Empress* ran into trouble in 1996, it is still possible to find oiled saltmarshes and oil leaching out of sandy beaches, especially following storms.

The impact on marine life from oil pollution goes beyond the visible effects, such as oiled birds and beaches. Some areas act as spawning or nursery grounds for fish or as harvesting grounds for wildlife populations and coastal communities. By oiling marine and coastal habitats, even temporarily, there can be a significant impact on fish stocks, migratory birds and local communities that depend on fishing and tourism.

The affected area was hit by another disaster in 1992, when the *Aegean Sea* tanker spilled approximately 30,000 tonnes of oil. The tanker grounded and burst into flames just outside the mouth of the Galician port of Coruna. That spill, which followed a similar disaster with the tanker *Urquiola* 16 years earlier, devastated 130 miles of coastline. Many believe the area is yet to recover.

WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS OF THIS PARTICULAR SPILL?

The spill has the potential to be twice as large as that from the *Exxon Valdez*. However, the conditions are very different, and currently it is impossible to say what the actual impacts will be. The effects will also depend on the type of oil being carried – particularly its density and toxic heavy metal content. However, given current wind conditions, there is a strong possibility that the oil will affect further areas of the coast. The effects of the spill will remain in the ecosystem for a very long time.

The number of birds that will be affected is significant. Threatened species include Iberian guillemots, gannets, some species of shearwater that are endemic to Spain, the European shag and the black-legged kittiwake. This is one of the main migratory periods for seabirds, so a large number of birds are in the area. So far, 92 oil-soaked birds have been taken to a sanctuary near La Coruna, including razorbills, gannets, guillemots and cormorants. The area is also home to one of Europe's largest populations of porpoises – these, together with bottlenose dolphins and fish from surface waters, are also likely to be affected.

WHAT IMPACTS WILL THE OIL HAVE ON MARINE LIFE?

The impact of the oil and some of the chemicals used in cleaning up spills can last for more than 20 years. Oil sticks to the feathers of seabirds, and is very damaging to fish and shellfish. Even very small amounts of oil on the sea surface can cause massive mortality in birds. If a bird's feathers are covered by oil, its ability to maintain body temperature is lost and it will freeze to death. Moreover, any intake of oil through food or water can be directly lethal or cause anaemia, reduced fertility, etc. Many species of seabirds are long-lived, with a low reproduction rate, so populations will need a long time to recover from episodes of massive adult loss.

WHAT IMPACTS WILL THE OIL HAVE ON HUMANS?

As well as being directly toxic to fish, oil can accumulate in a fish's body tissue and be passed up the food web, to humans. For this reason, previous spills have resulted in fisheries being closed on health grounds, with devastating consequences for fishers and fishing communities.

There is no way of assessing the impact should the spill involve more of the *Prestige*'s cargo, but with only 4,000 tonnes of oil having hit the shore, it is currently estimated that this disaster will lead to economic losses of €100 million, and affect 2,500 jobs in the fishing industry. The communities affected are already suffering under the mismanagement of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy, which has resulted in the depletion of fish stocks around Europe.

WHAT CAN WWF SUPPORTERS DO TO HELP?

You can adopt a dolphin at www.wwf.org.uk/adoption or by calling the Supporter Care Team on 01483 426333 which will help fund our work to protect marine areas and species, including the dolphins that are affected by this oil spill. You can also become a WWF member, or make a donation towards WWF-UK's general funds. This will help fund our work to lobby the government for better protection for marine areas, to prevent such disasters happening again.

WHAT IS WWF DOING ABOUT THIS DISASTER?

Many WWF offices have received offers from the public to help in clean-up operations. The conservation alliance Birdlife is co-ordinating volunteers on the ground. WWF is supporting them, and we are screening prospective volunteers. At present, there is a particular need for volunteers with relevant experience who can travel to La Coruna immediately and can remain on site for approximately

two weeks. After that time, the need for volunteers will be reassessed. If you want to volunteer, please call our Supporter Care team on 01483 426333 or e-mail supportercare@wwf.org.uk.

WWF is undertaking a number of activities on the ground. We are:

- the liaison body between NGOs and the Spanish authorities;
- advising the authorities on wildlife rescue, collection and treatment;
- sharing the experience acquired in the Persian Gulf, Patagonia, Galicia and the Canary Islands
- co-ordinating volunteers and teaching them how to clean the beach and rescue the animals;
- teaching volunteers how to put sandbanks in place, to stop a spill;
- advising the Spanish government on sensitive areas such as the Atlantic Islands National Park;
- analysing what needs to be done to avoid similar disasters in the future;
- criticising the lack of coordination between the various government bodies, and trying to bring them together.

CONCLUSION – WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

In 1991, the International Maritime Organisation approved guidelines for the identification of sea areas needing special protection – owing either to their ecological, socio-economic or scientific importance, or to their vulnerability to damage by maritime activities. Such areas would require stringent shipping management measures, including specified routes, areas to be avoided, and the mandatory reporting of a ship's position.

To date, only five such areas – known as Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas (PSSAs) – have been identified. These are: the Great Barrier Reef, Australia; the Sabana-Camaguey Archipelago, Cuba; the Malpelo Islands, Colombia; the Florida Keys, USA; and the Wadden Sea, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands.

WWF believes that in the UK, areas that should be considered for PSSA status include the west coast of Scotland, the Pembrokeshire coast and west coast of Wales, and the Isles of Scilly.