



IUCN Statement on the Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill

7 June 2010

The rising demand for energy is leading us into more difficult environments, increasing the risk of catastrophic accidents with a price that is too high both for human livelihoods and ecosystems. The technology to minimize the risks and effects of disasters such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is presently lacking. Our understanding of marine ecosystems and the short and long term impacts of such catastrophes is inadequate. Until our knowledge base is significantly improved and the necessary safeguards are in place, IUCN calls for a global moratorium on oil and gas exploitation in ecologically sensitive areas, including deepwater ocean sites and polar areas.

Six weeks on from the explosion that caused the Gulf spill, it is clear that the ecological and social damage will be severe. Oil reaching the coast has and will continue to damage coastal grasses and sea grass beds that are vital nursery grounds for shrimp and habitats for numerous other animals and plants. An estimated 90 percent of the seafood from the Gulf of Mexico is produced by the marshes of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. More than 130,000 jobs in the USA are estimated to be directly affected by the spill, especially fisherfolk and people working in tourism. The immediate cost to the Louisiana economy has been put at more than USD 4 billion, but the full cost to ecosystems and livelihoods will be much higher. Other Caribbean states including Mexico, Cuba, Bahamas and even Bermuda are predicted to be affected by the oil over the coming months

Images of the impacts on species and ecosystems are vivid demonstrations of the immediate effect of the oil spill, but the long term impacts of this disaster will be far reaching. Chemical dispersants are being used in the Gulf spill at an unprecedented scale and are being injected into deep ocean water without a clear understanding of their full impact. The toxic effects of these dispersants will be long lasting in the food chain, especially on sensitive species such as bottom dwellers and plankton.

Low cost and easily accessible oil and gas has given many people choices and freedoms that never existed before. However, our overdependence on fossil fuels has been costly in terms of contributing to air and water pollution, rampant land-use change, overharvesting of our seas, increasing greenhouse gas emissions and consequent climate change. Our transition to a clean energy future must start now. Investment in research and development for clean technology and energy efficiency must be ramped up. Our economies need to shift rapidly to renewable energy sources, and more effectively take into account biodiversity and livelihood impacts.

Weaning our economies off their addiction to fossil fuel energy will not be easy, and it will not happen overnight, but business as usual cannot be an option. The global nature of the problem calls for collaborative action between countries, industry and civil society. We urge the corporate energy sector to join with us in creating new forms of economic organization, technological advancement, and support governmental regulations that encourage decisions in every sector for sustainability and equity, secure the basics of life for everyone, and permit the planet, our only home, to flourish in all of its diversity.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Marton-Lefèvre'.

Julia Marton-Lefèvre
IUCN Director General

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Ashok Khosla'.

Ashok Khosla
IUCN President