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Slick information about offshore oil pollution

Birds I View

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Access to information and transparency of process are buzz words that permeate the airwaves and print media. Yet below the buzz, transparent information flow is a prerequisite for good governance, the democratic functioning of society, an open knowledge-based university, and as I focus on here effective environmental regulation and safeguards.

Consider this brief overview of information that the Canadian Newfoundland Offshore Petroleum Board [CNLOPB] has provided to the public and their responses to oil spills at offshore platforms.

On 21 November 2004, Terra Nova announced a platform spill that was eventually reported to be more than 1100 barrels. Terra Nova indicated that no oiled wildlife were observed. Though there were no independent observers present and no independent validation of the reports, the CNLOPB repeated the press releases of the operator in the news.

More than a week after the incident, Environment Canada conducted surveys for birds and modeled findings and previous information to estimate that 10,000 murres and dovekeys were killed. In court, Terra Nova pleaded guilty to wildlife charges and was fined \$70,000 [likely a minimal consequence in light of 2005 4th quarter profits of \$614,000,000].

Here's how the events played out four years later when on 9 September 2008, Husky reported a platform spill, eventually estimated at 30 barrels of crude oil. The operator reported that no oiled wildlife were seen in this seabird hotspot. As is the modus operandi, though there were no independent observers or arms-length validation of the reports, the CNLOPB again repeated the press releases of the corporate operator. There was no investigation for oiled birds.

Environmental regulation and vigilance clearly necessitate something more stringent than self-reporting by a corporate complex that is liable for wildlife and environmental damages.

The most recent incident was revealed on 3 January 2014. This was two weeks after the spill, when on some unknown basis the CNLOPB reported that on 18 December, there had been a spill of 10 liters at Hibernia. Also on 3 January 2014,

Hibernia informed the public that on 27 December 2013, nine days after the reported 10 liter spill that small slicks were still appearing around the platform.

These slicks were reportedly in the order of 0.009 liters to 0.8 liters of oil. This level of precision is astonishing as 9 ml is scarcely enough to stain a teacup, though the estimate was not made in a cup but rather in the North Atlantic Ocean.

The plot and oil thicken. On 18 January, one month after the reported spill Hibernia changed their estimate of the 10 liter spill by 600 times to 6,000 liters. Such revision is in sharp contrast with the exactitude reported for slicks.

What assurance is there about the revised estimate of a 6,000 liter spill from a 16,000 liter holding tank? Of course, there was no survey for wildlife. Why would there have been when a spill of only 10 liters was reported.

What does the CNLOPB have to say? They are trying to understand and may revise the way they estimate spills in the future.

So given this level of “transparent information”, how do we know what’s going on out there? We know because the corporations that are liable for pollution told us and because the federal-provincial regulator repeated what they were told.

Oil Rig Adjacent to Witless Bay Seabird Ecological Reserve

The Witless Bay Ecological Reserve is the most impacted Seabird Ecological Reserve in the province. And the risks may rising.

In recent weeks *West Aquarius* drill rig has been parked just outside the reserve and has brilliantly illuminated the night sky and surrounding area. Were this or any other dazzlingly lit rig or vessel near the reserve during the April through September breeding period of seabirds, it would cause untold disturbance and mortality.

Owls in the area

On 21 February, a raucous murder of shrieking crows and screaming jays in our yard drew me to a boreal owl perched in a fir. The corvid attack team moved off as I approached, though chickadees continued sharp alarm calls and swooping within inches of the tiny owl who paid little heed to them or me.

Other signs of owls in the area included a great horned owl hunting rabbits at Rushmere Farm on the Argentia Road (Dick Whitaker). As well, early on the morning of 24 February, Kathryn Welbourn found a bird kill on the Sunshine Camp trail. Later I retrieved the carcass of a reddish ruffed grouse. A feather explosion and litters of feathers along the trail suggested that the grouse had been struck by a bird of prey that was plucking it along the way.

The carcass was rock solid frozen at 11 am, indicating it had been killed the previous night. Boreal owls are much smaller than grouse so unlikely to be responsible. A great horned owl could have been the attacker, though whatever predator attacked the grouse, a burning question remains. Why did the predator leave its kill? Was it flushed by another predator that did not take the bounty?

Also on 24 February, Sue Kelland-Dyer called about a flightless injured juvenile snowy owl at Point LaHaye. Sue called Salmonier Nature Park staff who quickly came to the rescue.

Birds in the area and around the province

2014 is developing into a remarkable year for sea ice. The Gulf of St. Lawrence is jammed, and the reason Darroch Whitaker obtained a stranded Common Murre on the west coast roadway. Darroch kept the bird well watered and fed overnight, successfully releasing it the next day when shifting winds created open water.

A male ring-necked pheasant was spotted crossing Greenslades Road in Long Pond Manuels on 24 February (Bruce Bennett). The one-footed crow is alive and well in the Neary's Pond neighborhood visiting feeders in a family group. Doris and Max Smith observed a flock of thousands of robins in Hodges Cove. The birds are moving, and I couldn't find them when I stopped by a few days later. Since Valentine's Day, sunny morning juncos have celebrating spring song.

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