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Bracing for Spill, Florida Keys' Residents Plan Their Own Cleanup



By NATHAN THORNBURGH / KEY WEST Monday, Jun. 14, 2010

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Maya Totman, a worker with Florida Keys Wildlife Rescue, hopes to keep oil from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill from mixing with the garbage because of the deadly impact it could have on the local wildlife.
Miami Herald / MCT / Landov



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A small island in the middle of a big ocean, Key West has always made a virtue of its isolation. In 1982, for example, an onerous Border Patrol checkpoint on US 1, which links the Keys to mainland Florida, caused the island to declare itself the autonomous Conch Republic. This Republic was, of course, mostly a joke ("We Seceded Where Others Failed" was its E Pluribus Unum), but the mayor's declaration of independence did include a twinge of real anger and a vow that "we have no intention of suffering in the future at the hands of fools and bureaucrats."

Now, facing the possibility that oil from the Deepwater Horizon spill could arrive on its reefs and beaches in the coming weeks, many in the Florida Keys are once again angry about perceived "fools and bureaucrats." In particular, they've watched how BP has monopolized and, in the eyes of many, mismanaged the oil cleanup in the northern Gulf of Mexico, and are frantically trying to organize an independent local response.

(See pictures of the Gulf oil spill.)

"We cannot wait, we have to be prepared," says Dan Robey, whose website Keysspill.com has gathered a list of 4,000 volunteers, including 300 boat captains, who have offered to help

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before and after any potential arrival of oil. As Patrick Rice, the Dean of Marine Science and Technology at Florida Keys Community College, put it: "We will not allow the inept responses that have been happening up north to happen here."

But there's a problem with their plans for grassroots activism: BP (and the Deepwater Horizon's Unified Command that it runs with the Coast Guard and other agencies) has so far insisted on complete control of its cleanup operations. A BP spokesman told TIME that the only appropriate way for interested boat captains to become involved would be to register with the Unified Command's Vessels of Opportunity program. Never mind that according to BP's own numbers, only a third of the 7,200 boats "under contract" through the program are in active service. Robey says captains in the Keys haven't even been able to register. "It's a joke, a total joke," he says. "Our people have called them for over a month, they don't return phone calls." **(Watch TIME's video "Portraits From the Oil Spill.")**

Uncertainty is another complicating factor. Locals want to start preparing now, even though it's unclear how much oil will arrive and in what form — sheen, plume, tarball, or all three. And BP and the Coast Guard won't start really organizing, or funding, a response yet. "The general feeling is that BP has been reluctant to support advanced preparation," says Laura Fox, owner of Danger Charters in Key West. "The Coast Guard's big party line is that until oil is imminent — within 72 hours — nothing is going to be done. That's not enough time to protect 180 miles or more of shoreline we have in the Keys."

So without waiting for protocol, the Keys are making preemptive strikes. A group called Adopt a Mangrove is assigning kayakers their own mangroves to clean if oil comes. Volunteers are monitoring the shore for signs of oil throughout the islands. The Florida Keys Environmental Coalition formed to connect boat captains, scientists, environmental activists and various agencies. Fox coordinated a cleanup of Man Key, a mangrove island west of Key West (oil is easier to clean off a beach that is in good condition). "It was all women, actually," she says. "Thirteen women in kayaks, clenching knives in their teeth, cutting monofilament fishing line off the mangroves and clearing trash. We brought out 35 bags of trash off the island."

See 12 people to blame for the oil spill.

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"I'm innocent and he's a jackass, just like his movies."

ELIZABETH RAY, a 59-year-old resident of a street in West Chester, Pa., where Bam Margera of MTV's *Jackass* owns a nightclub; Ray was arrested on Saturday for allegedly attacking Margera with a bat following a noise complaint she made about the establishment

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