



Black Tide: Voices from the Gulf

2011 • 87 minutes • Directed by Joe Berlinger • Produced by Animal Planet for Discovery Inc.

The rich waters of the Gulf of Mexico provide 30% of America's seafood and harbor some of the nation's richest oil reserves. On April 20, 2010, an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon, an oil rig located in the Gulf off the coast of Louisiana, killed 11 people. In the weeks that followed, 200 million gallons of oil gushed into the Gulf of Mexico, bringing Louisiana's oil and seafood industries to a halt. Award-winning filmmaker Joe Berlinger examines the impact of the largest offshore oil spill in American history on the lives of Louisiana residents living on the shores of the Gulf.





CURATOR AND WRITERS:

This documentary was selected by

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“*We wanted to move beyond the finger pointing and policy debates and put a human face on the plight of the residents of this vital region of America ... The people of the Gulf still face enormous consequences from the spill.*

—Joe Berlinger, director

WHY WE SELECTED THIS FILM

Even though coverage on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill eventually faded from national news media, local residents continue to feel the impact individually, economically, and environmentally one year later. The film highlights the need for local communities to continue fighting for justice through political action to continue the cleanup, revive the economy, mitigate damage to flora and fauna, and gather scientific information to better quantify the impact of future similar disasters. The film reminds viewers that disasters of this size and scale harm local communities in a multitude of ways that may not be visible, and that without sustained action to hold oil companies accountable, environmental justice is hard to achieve.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Corporate Social Responsibility
Environmental Justice
Fishing
Habitat Loss

North American Studies
Oceans and Coasts
Public Health

SUMMARY

One year after the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, the coastal communities of Grand Isle, Louisiana had still not recovered from the devastating effects wrought by the 200 million gallons of oil spilled following the explosion. Documentary filmmaker Joe Berlinger traveled across the Louisiana coast interviewing local fishers, restaurant owners, marine scientists, and British Petroleum (BP) representatives to find out how they dealt with the cleanup. The departure of news media in the months after the initial explosion left coastal Louisianans to quietly rebuild their lives. Berlinger’s documentary provides critical insight into a story of recovery in the wake of the disaster.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

The Louisiana fishers, business owners, and communities whose livelihoods depend on coastal resources like shellfish, bivalves, and fish were hit hard by an environmental disaster in which they played no part. Although they received some financial settlements, many aspects of their livelihoods, like the loss of fishing culture and community, were not accounted for. By focusing on the spill’s broad impact on the local communities, the film highlights the efforts of residents who are fighting for environmental justice in the wake of an environmental catastrophe.



KEY PEOPLE

Dr. Samantha Joye – professor of marine sciences, University of Georgia

Mike Utsler – COO, BP Gulf Coast Restoration Organization

Al & Sal Sunsari – Co-owners of P&J Oyster Company

Ewell Smith – executive director of the Louisiana Seafood Board

James Carville – political consultant

Sarah Rigaud – owner of Sarah’s Restaurant

Ken Feinberg – BP claims administrator

Tim Kerner – mayor of Jean Lafitte, Louisiana

Floyd Lasseigne – coastal fisher

Dr. Moby Solangi – director of the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies

Henry Mayfield – commercial fisher

Mike Voison – CEO, Motivait Seafoods



FILM SEQUENCES

Plumes of oil (00:00–15:00)

The first part of the film examines the impact of the Deepwater Horizon explosion, fire, and oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico on the region’s waters, ecosystems, communities, fisheries, and other businesses one year after the spill. Scientist Samantha Joye describes her experience finding residual plumes of oil beneath the water’s surface and the difficulties she faced trying to gain the attention of government agencies and the media. “Just because you can’t see [the impact],” she says, “doesn’t mean it’s not there.”



The response from BP (15:00–21:00)

BP starts to use dispersants to break up the flow of oil. Fishers and scientists are worried about the impact of the dispersants on ecosystems. Scientists oppose the use of dispersants.



The economic impact of a moratorium on oil drilling (21:00–26:00)

The film highlights the ripple effect from the moratorium. With boats tied up, trucks are not operating, and local business owners struggle to survive.



The compensation process (26:00–30:00)

Fishers and small business owners become eligible for redress. BP’s claims administrator describes how the company provided compensation.

“Just because you can’t see [the impact] doesn’t mean it’s not there.

—Samantha Joye, Professor of Marine Sciences

Food contamination, safety of seafood, and effects on mammals

(30:00–39:00)

Community members gather to discuss how food is being contaminated from the use of dispersants. One member of the community says, “Putting pollution in pollution is not a solution.” Scientists at the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies show how dolphins and turtles were affected by the oil spill. The oil’s toxicity might have induced pneumonia in turtles. Marine organisms, unable to tolerate such large quantities of oil, are suffocating. Scientists investigate the wellhead area with an underwater expedition.

Perspectives of oyster fishers (39:00–1:06:00)



The long-term effects of the spill on residents, commercial fishers, and oyster businesses are described. How are local businesses adjusting to losing their market for seafood and, subsequently, their income? Business owners plead their case to federal government officials. “Once the media leaves,” one business owner says, “we need government agencies.” Oyster fishers plan to showcase their food at festivals to convince the public that Louisiana shellfish are safe to consume.

Health and well-being of mammals, marine organisms, and human communities after the spill (1:06:00–1:18:40)

Dr. Samantha Joye presents research on the impact of oil in deep water, noting that it might take years, even decades, to get rid of the oil. Some scientists disagree on the long-term impact on ecosystems. Another scientist looks into the health and well-being of the workforce involved in the spill and their communities along the coast. Residents complain about long-term effects of the spill: Students are experiencing breathing problems, asthma, and bronchitis. Other residents complain about ear infections, coughs, and sinus problems. The film ends with the proclamation, “There’s only so much that we can pollute and sustain the planet. We are pushing ourselves toward the edge.”



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the environmental impacts and human consequences of the spill? Which communities and groups of people were affected the most? What do you think about the scale of impact: Was the impact long-term or short-term?
2. Who responded to the oil spill? Did all the different players affected by the spill come together, and if so, how?
3. How do different parties view the impact of the oil spill? What are their motivations, and do these motivations influence their perspectives? Who are the groups that disagree the most? How do they overcome their differences to reach solutions?
4. Do you think BP's response was adequate? What do community groups think about it?
5. Imagine you worked for BP at the time of the spill. Do you think you could have done more, given the constraints the corporate culture might have placed on you? How would you have navigated the company's expectations and those of the people impacted by the spill?
6. What are dispersants, and why are they used? How do they break down in water? Why did BP decide to use them? What were some of their benefits? What are the dangers of using dispersants?
7. Place yourself in the shoes of a government or company official responsible for compensating people impacted by the spill. How would you develop a compensation scheme? What kind of criteria would you use to assess the spill's damage? How would you decide what is fair compensation? How would you compensate someone for the loss of his or her livelihood?
8. Do you think the documentary accurately captured a diverse set of perspectives on the spill? Think about the racial and gender dynamics in the film. Whose voices were heard? Whose voices were not heard? Were there perspectives missing from the discussion? For example, did you notice that only two African American men were interviewed in the documentary? Consider the fact that Louisiana has one of the highest populations of African Americans in the United States.
9. What is your overall perspective on the film? Did the film surprise you? Did it end on a hopeful note? What is the bias of the filmmaker? What do you think this film achieves, and what does it fail to achieve?

“*We are destroying the earth through our addiction to oil and if we really had the collective will and long-term concern about the future of the planet and the next generation, we would get off of oil.*”

—Joe Berlinger, director

ACTIVITIES

1. **Learn about the generational impact of the oil spill** (45:00 -46:00)

“Fishing is the way of life in Grand Isle, Louisiana”, one of the fishers says. What was the impact of the oil spill on communities that have been fishing for generations? Look up news articles or media coverage that consider and cover the situation of fishers today in Grand Isle. Did the oil spill have a long-lasting impact? Did it change fishing culture in Grand Isle? How could BP compensate those who feel like they can no longer build a life based on their traditions and historical knowledge of fishing?

2. **Watch oyster fishers appeal to the government to bring back business to Grand Isle** (1:00:45-1:06:00)



In this clip, oyster fishers appeal to the government to assure people that Gulf Coast oysters are safe to consume. They recognize that because the media covered only the disaster and did not sufficiently cover the recovery efforts, the public continues to be wary of Louisiana shellfish. Use this example to think about media coverage of other environmental disasters (for example, [the water crisis in Flint, Michigan](#)). How are these events covered? What happens when the media leave? Consider the roles of different kinds of media in environmental disasters, such as short news clips versus longer film documentaries. Do you think that media coverage and documentary films should advocate for the communities affected by

environmental disasters? What are the dangers and benefits of taking on this advocacy role? Could media coverage have helped the oyster fishers bring back the business they lost?



SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Articles and News Reports

[Study shows toxic effects of oil dispersant on oysters following Deepwater Horizon spill](#) (2018)

[BP's Deepwater Horizon bill tops \\$65bn](#) (2018)

[BP spill victims still demand justice](#) (2018)

[The Deepwater Horizon spill happened eight years ago. The ocean still hasn't recovered](#) (2018)

[Deepwater Horizon oil spill: Oil biodegradation inhibited in deep-sea sediments](#) (2018)

[Deepwater Horizon disaster altered building blocks of ocean life](#) (2018)

[Study shows toxic effects of oil dispersant on oysters following Deepwater Horizon spill](#) (2018)

[Trump administration rolls back environmental protections inspired by Deepwater Horizon catastrophe](#) (2018)

Read an [interview with the director](#) in the *Times-Picayune* (2011)

Maps and Mapping Tools

U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (n.d.). [Deepwater Horizon Trajectory Maps](#).

U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (n.m.). [Environmental Response Management Application](#).

U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (n.d.). [General NOAA Operational Modeling Environment \(GNOME\)](#).

National and State Government

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (n.d.). [Enforcement of Deepwater Horizon BP Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill](#).

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2010). [Effects of Oil on Wildlife and Habitat](#).

U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (n.d.). [Office of Response and Restoration](#).

Non-governmental Organizations and Non-profit Organizations

Environmental Defense Fund (n.d.). [Eight years later: What's ahead for the Gulf](#).

Smithsonian Ocean (2018). [Gulf Oil Spill](#).

Motel, Seth (2015). [5 facts about the BP oil spill](#). Pew Research Center.

“ *We have no right to destroy the environment of the other creatures inhabiting this planet for our own selfish needs.*

—Joe Berlinger, director

Peer-Reviewed Literature

Ainsworth C.H., Paris C.B., Perlin N., Dornberger L.N., Patterson W.F. III, Chancellor E., et al (2018). [Impacts of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill evaluated using an end-to-end ecosystem model](#). PLoS ONE 13(1): e0190840.

U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (n.d.). [Full list of publications](#).

Podcasts and Radio Shows

[Deepwater Horizon](#) (NPR)

[The 5th Anniversary of Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill](#) (Science Daily)

[Oil: Stories from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill](#) (The Story Collider)

Videos

U.S. Chemical Safety Board and Hazard Investigation Board (2014). [Deepwater Horizon Blowout Animation](#) (01:20-50:34).

Pew Charitable Trusts (n.d.). [The Gulf Oil Spill: Effects on Marine Life](#).