

COMBATING THE DEADLY EFFECTS OF OIL ON MARINE LIFE

Hugo Nijkamp, Rosalie e'Silva & Roser Gasol

Sea Alarm Foundation; Rue du Cyprès 7 B-10, 1000 Brussels, Belgium; nijkamp@sea-alarm.org, www.sea-alarm.org.

Images of oiled wildlife are often the main focus of public concern and media attention during an oil spill incident. Despite this, it is one of the areas of oil spill preparedness that is the least developed in most countries outside the USA. This is surprising as oil spills of any size have the potential to significantly impact vulnerable populations of seabirds, marine mammals, sea turtles, and other types of wildlife that inhabit the world's coastal seas and shorelines.

Experience shows that the best way to ensure that wildlife affected by oil is successfully treated, including professional attempts to rescue, rehabilitate and release casualties, is to have a wildlife plan in place *before* a spill actually occurs. A major oiling event can potentially affect tens of thousands of animals, especially birds, and once washed up on shore, a country is faced with a significant animal welfare and management problem requiring immediate attention. Under tremendous pressure, and with the clock ticking for suffering animals, it is far more effective to put a well elaborated and tested plan into action than it is to improvise in the situation without adequate experience or knowledge of how to mobilize professional expertise.

The Middle East is especially vulnerable due to its high level of oil production and transport activities, combined with its significant marine wildlife populations. Numerous species of whales, dolphins and turtles frequent the waters around the Middle East, and a significant proportion of the world's dugongs inhabit the waters of the Arabian Gulf. Hundreds of species of migratory birds from Europe, Asia and sub-Antarctic regions also frequent the area.

In most countries, unprepared government agencies leave the issue of the rescue and rehabilitation of oiled wildlife to voluntary groups, including animal welfare, wildlife and environmental charities. Whilst most do an excellent job, they generally lack the resources needed to plan for oiled wildlife emergencies or to respond to major incidents. Co-operation between groups within a country or region can also be poor and levels of expertise and trained manpower are highly variable. The Brussels-based Sea Alarm Foundation, founded in 1999, has made it its mission to change this situation and improve the way countries respond to oiled wildlife incidents.

Since 2005, Sea Alarm has collaborated with Oil Spill Response and East Asia Response Limited (OSRL/EARL) to further the development of international oiled wildlife response capacity. OSRL/EARL is a non-profit making organisation that is wholly owned by the oil industry, and exists to respond effectively to oil spills wherever they occur. Membership is representative of the world's most environmentally responsible oil companies, accounting for over 60% of global oil production.

The joint programme agreed between Sea Alarm and OSRL/EARL unites the resources available from networks of NGOs (Sea Alarm) with those from the oil industry (OSRL/EARL). The programme's main activities significantly increase the international response capacity for oiled wildlife incidents. Special response equipment is stockpiled in OSRL/EARL's warehouses in the UK, and will soon also be stored in Bahrain and Singapore, which is ready to be sent out around the world at a moment's notice. Sea Alarm is on-call 24 hours 7 days a week to receive notifications of oiled wildlife incidents and requests for assistance and is developing a coordinated network of global wildlife response experts that are ready to respond within hours to an oil spill emergency. A database is being developed in which so called Country Wildlife Response Profiles are stored. The profiles contain the essential information

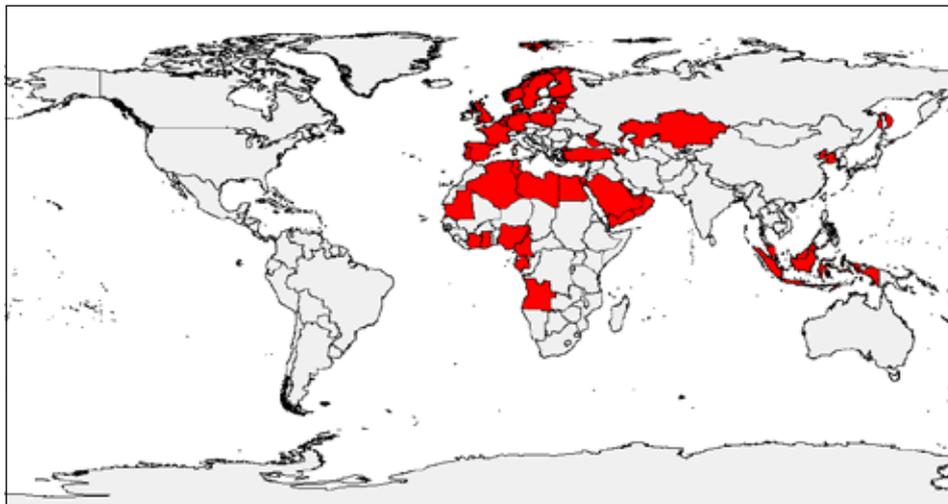


Fig 1. A map displaying the countries which are at present included in Sea Alarm's database of Country Wildlife Response Profiles (©Sea Alarm Foundation).

on the level of preparedness in coastal countries all over the world and the resources that could be called upon nationally and internationally. All these facilities are available to OSRL/EARL shareholders, and also to third parties on request.

In numerous countries, Sea Alarm has brought together government authorities, representatives from the oil and maritime industry, wildlife responders, and NGOs, and facilitated the cooperation between them. By building bridges between these key stakeholders, Sea Alarm assists in the development of pre-spill defined objectives and guidelines of good practice, and ensures access to quality information. At present, Sea Alarm is initiating and assisting in the preparedness and response activities in many European coastal countries. At the request of governments, environmental groups and the oil and maritime industry, Sea Alarm has provided on site assistance and advice to a number of oiled wildlife incidents, including the *Jessica* (Galapagos, 2001), *Prestige* (Spain, 2002), *Tricolor* (Belgium, 2003), Estonia (Mystery spill, 2006), *Server* (Norway, 2007), *Volgoneft* (Russia, 2007), and Germany (Mystery spills in 2007 and 2008), and distant support to a number of smaller European incidents.

Much remains to be done to protect wildlife from the damaging effects of oil pollution, but with the wealth of information and guidance currently available, countries are well poised to develop effective oiled wildlife response plans. Sea Alarm stands ready to provide information and assistance to interested parties seeking to increase the level of response preparedness in the Middle East region.



Fig 2. Black Sea Spill 2007 : A volunteer assisting in the collection of oiled birds (©Sea Alarm Foundation).