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## Oysterman watches and waits, eager to either help or get back to work

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HOPEDALE, La. – Far out in the shallows, at the sweet spot where freshwater from the land and salt from the sea play a perfect duet, Ray Vath stands in his boat, ringed by uneasy horizons.

To Vath's left, distant oil rigs form the only dark and immobile points on a soft sky. To his right, still miles out but coming closer, is BP's oil.

"This is the best place Mother Nature gives us," Vath says over wind and motor sounds. "The farther the oil comes in, the worse it's going to be."

No one knows yet what portion of the geyser of crude from BP's wrecked Deepwater Horizon platform will reach these premier oyster grounds of southeastern Louisiana and the marshes that surround and shelter them.

Or the barrier islands, beaches and backwater wetlands of Mississippi, Alabama, Florida – or Texas, since wind and current are fickle.

Even if BP can stop the leak nearly a mile down, serious ecological harm from oil already spilled is inevitable, says Dr. Ron Kendall of Texas Tech University.

With attention focused on oily beaches, says Kendall, an environmental toxicologist and expert on the effects of oil spills, most changes are invisible, locked into the gulf food chain for years – perhaps many years if the leak goes on.

Vath worries about that. He describes himself as the kind of person who thinks about tomorrow, next week, next year.

He chooses, for example, to toss back little oysters so they can grow, unlike some who grab all they can for a payday today – "like instead of cutting your grass, you go and yank it out."

Vath is 45 and the fifth generation of his family to make a living from fishing these waters. His son Brian, 22, is the sixth.

"There's oil activity all around here," Ray Vath says, sweeping his arm toward the platforms. "We don't hate them. We don't think they hate us. We have coexisted in my 30 years of doing this. But we've also

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Photos by VERNON BRYANT/DMN  
Shrimper Brian Broussard wraps up nets at the port in Venice, La. Out of work since the mandatory shutdown, he prepares to help clean up the oil spill.

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never had this kind of spill.

"This is what I've done for 30 years," he repeats. "My father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather.

"My son."

## Washing away

Spill fighting has a warlike look. Big military planes dump chemical dispersants on the slick. [National Guard](#) trucks painted in green camouflage haul boats, also camoed, up the highway to the battle's launch points.

With oil already on Louisiana's easternmost sandspits, the Chandeleur Islands, Guard members in long-sleeved camo, desert boots and white hardhats sat by a bayou and chatted, awaiting orders to deploy orange boom piled at the ready. One soldier juggled to pass time.

An entrepreneurial spirit also rises. Beside the highway south to Venice, the last anything before the Mississippi's mouth, a lawyer's sign solicits spill-damage claims.

Other signs, spray-painted on plywood and hammered into the median every few miles, advertise living quarters for spill workers: 12 men, two baths.

The fuel dock at Breton Sound sold 3,000 gallons of diesel in the six hours by lunch one day last week, about 10 times what is typically sold in a whole day. Most went to spill contractors or government agencies; every other boat was tied up at the dock, unable to fish but hoping for a call from BP.

Ray Vath was told he and his oyster boat, Two Rays, didn't qualify for a spill job. He fishes out of St. Bernard Parish, closest to the spill, but lives two counties away in Jefferson Parish. BP wanted to show that it was helping the locals; Vath wasn't local enough.

Vath shrugs. "People think because this is an oil company, they're going to be millionaires," he says, piloting the Two Rays down a bayou south from Hopedale.

"The only people going to be millionaires are the lawyers. I don't want your money. Stay away and let me go back to work. All I want to do is to do what I do best."

His son, however, is indignant.

"My boat stays right there with all them other boats," he says, standing on his father's deck. "His boat stays with all them other boats. I do the same type work they do.

"What makes me any less of a fisherman? The only difference is they've got an address down here and I don't."

Lack of work gives father and son time to show how the marshes and islands, storm-chewed and starved of new delta soil by upstream diversions, no longer hold off waves, erosion or, now, oil.

"Used to be, from Chandeleur to Black Bay, [big waves] had to start up again," Ray Vath says as the Two Rays chugs through a channel 50 yards wide where thick marshes once thrived.

"Now it never slows down. It builds and builds and builds. You ought to watch these waves hit this shore. Every time that water comes back, it's black. It's washing away the bank.

"If this oil gets in here, it kills the estuaries. Shrimp and all. It's going to come back, I mean Mother Nature. I may not see it. You may not see it.

"We may be gone before it comes back."

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## Fish, birds

Just as the BP spill shows how the river, marshes, oil, livelihoods and emotions are all strands of one web, oil is also complicated. It's more a concoction of chemicals than a single substance.

Its constituents, when separated either chemically or by the 900-degree heat of a refinery's distilling towers, can become anything from asphalt to jet fuel to plastic. That complexity also gives oil gushing into the environment a big arsenal of toxic weaponry, says Kendall, the environmental toxicologist.

Kendall is the director of Texas Tech's highly regarded toxicology research center, the Institute of Environmental and Human Health. He is also chief editor of a new scholarly book, *Wildlife Toxicology: Emerging Contaminant and Biodiversity Issues*, coincidentally set for publication Monday.

Kendall has studied the long-term effects of the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill and the pollution that [Hurricane Katrina](#) spread in 2005. He also carries another Gulf Coast credential: "I'm a good fly fisherman."

Kendall says the BP spill is a serious threat to the gulf system, from the exposed wetlands near the coast to the deep bottoms, and the water in between.

"It's going to be one of the biggest wildlife toxicology experiments we've ever had," he says – more complex than the Exxon Valdez because of the variety of habitats and species at risk.

There's no good time or place for a spill, but spring in the upper gulf is particularly bad. Marine life is breeding, hatching, growing and maturing now in the marshes that lie in the oil's path.

"Juvenile shrimp and crabs, they're up in those inland marshes now," Kendall says. "You could see them if you were in there with a kayak, big schools of them. If that oil gets up in there, it could wipe out an entire age class."

Small youngsters such as redfish are also in the marshes, preparing to move into the estuaries as they grow. Then they'll head for deeper water, tracking through every part of the upper gulf that the oil is coating or contaminating.

Bluefin tuna are at risk. "This is their time," Kendall says. "They come in, they're spawning, and you don't want to expose the larvae to the oil. This is the worst time of the year and the worst spot for this."

Birds, too, are at a critical stage. Vast numbers of wading birds have formed nesting colonies in the upper gulf, trying to raise their young.

Even Venice, a gritty and hardworking fishing, refinery and oil-rig service settlement, has trees studded with white and glossy ibises and snowy egrets.

Brown pelicans, Louisiana's state bird, are sailing. A lone osprey scans for fish.

Just a bit of oil can kill a bird and its young. Hypothermia from feathers that no longer insulate is a big cause. A bird trying to clean itself will ingest oil, causing kidney and liver damage and perhaps even a fast death.

"If they get it on their breast feathers, they take it back to the nest," Kendall says. "It'll kill their eggs."

No creature faces a worse threat than oysters, Kendall says. "They'll bioaccumulate aromatic hydrocarbons" – that is, toxic components of oil – "real quick."

## Last breath

Ray Vath watches the tide. Will the oil come in with rising water or recede?

"If that oil gets there when the tide goes down," he says, indicating a low clump of surviving marsh far out in open water, "that oil's going to coat those oysters."

"Oysters open up and close to breathe. If they open up right as the water's going off of them, trying to take their last breath, so to speak, if there's oil in there, I can't say if it will kill it, or make it taste funny, or if it will ever go away."

High tide is a risk, too. Chemical dispersants, cousins of regular detergent, don't eliminate oil; they break oil up into tiny globules that sink. Then currents might carry it far.

"It's going to hit the bottom," Vath says. "Fine. Then you're going to have those 15-foot waves, and that's when it starts moving again. You're going to have oil on oysters and killing fish, and you don't even know where it came from."

Nonetheless, life, like marshes and oil, is complicated. Oil might kill his oysters, Vath says; oil, as diesel, fuels his boat. There is room for irony, he says, not anger.

"Unless BP says they deliberately sabotaged this billion-dollar rig, or \$10 billion rig, whatever the hell the rig cost, I don't think they did this intentionally to get even with me," Vath says.

"But it was your responsibility. If I take this boat and slam it into that wharf" – the Two Rays is easing past a neighbor's empty dock – "that guy's going to expect me to replace that wharf. I'm going to expect myself to replace that wharf. We were brought up that way. That's all we're looking for.

"Cap this damn thing, hope this oil doesn't come in here, and I'll go back to work tomorrow, no hard feelings."

Perhaps, Vath says, that calm arrived in 2005 when he sat by Brian's side in a hospital room. A drunken driver had hit his son's car.

It happened two weeks after Katrina. The storm had put the Two Rays up on a levee. Vath told the government man who called to say he must move it that no, he would leave the boat until he knew whether his son would live. Brian was comatose for 28 days.

"Maybe that's why this doesn't bother me," Vath says. Or maybe, he says, it's knowing that 11 families lost husbands, fathers or sons when the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded on April 20.

Vath's cellphone rings, a happy, chirping sound against the engine's thrum. After a short talk, it seems that suddenly he is local enough.

"That was the call I've been waiting for," he says. "They're ready for this boat."

"This boat?" asks the son who lived.

"This boat."

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