

Film and the Gulf Oil Spill

By Chris Palmer and Peter Kimball (July 2010)

The pelican, weighed down and mired in dark, heavy oil has become a symbol for the destruction and devastation of the BP oil spill. More than any statistic, it will be the photographs and footage that define how we think about and remember this disaster. Film allows every viewer to share in the pain and disgust at the wreckage. Filmmakers must realize this unique power of film and see the tragedy in the Gulf as a call to action to create more films showing the realities of the problems facing our planet.

The realities of the oil spill are shocking and horrifying. Over 100 million gallons of oil have leaked since the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded on April 20. Oil has made landfall along hundreds of miles of the Gulf Coast and eventual loss to local economies has been estimated at over 11 billion dollars. The effect on the environment and wildlife has been devastating, with whole habitats decimated and thousands of marine animals dying – including endangered species like the Kemp's Ridley sea turtle.

As dramatic as these figures are, it is the images of pelicans and other animals, coated in oil and dying, that best help us to truly appreciate the extent of the suffering. One of the most powerful aspects of film is that it enables anyone with access to a television or a computer screen to see images directly captured at the scene. It is telling that there have been so many reported cases of BP limiting photographers' access to the spill. As photojournalist Cristina Mittermeier wrote, "Images awaken people from boredom and apathy on issues that are important to all of us."

Considering the obvious impact of film, it is unconscionable that so many nature films and television programs make no effort to encourage conservation. In the Gulf, we see the true impact of man's reckless abuse of the environment, and yet far too many supposedly nature-orientated programs focus only on sensationalizing and exploiting animals. While images of poor, oily pelicans inspire sympathy, images of animal violence inspire excitement, fear and hatred. Graphic footage of shark attacks and feeding frenzies might be entertaining, but it is unlikely to inspire viewers to have any interest in preserving sharks and their habitats. It is irresponsible to depict animals only as menacing and man-eating killers at a time when their numbers are plummeting by shark finning and other threats.

The time has also passed for making films that show only pretty pictures of the world. Good films will inspire a reverence and awe for the beauties of the natural world, but will also truthfully present the problems and threats. Filmmakers must rise to the occasion and create films that not only entertain but that inspire and motivate. Just as the images from the Gulf spill have inspired us to demand solutions, we must realize that the oil spill in the Gulf is not an isolated incident, but is instead the inevitable consequence of our continued excessive demand for fossil fuels. Even now, oil companies are moving forward with new development projects, drilling new wells, and building new pipelines.

Film can – and must – serve as a call to action. A good film will show us the true scope and impact of environmental disasters like the oil spill and will inspire us to fix the underlying problems. While filmmakers have a responsibility to create better, more responsible films, we, the viewers have a responsibility to take action. As far as the Gulf is concerned, we need to start

phasing out offshore oil production. It is up to us, the viewers, to work for the protection of the environment, but powerful and effective images can catalyze citizen action and mobilize people to demand that man-made tragedies like the sickening death and destruction in the Gulf never happen again.

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