



## Diary of a Disaster: 6 Months in the Gulf

What it's like to respond to an environmental and democratic crisis—and where we go from here.

by Riki Ott

**America awoke the morning of April 21 to learn that BP's well, the Deepwater Horizon, [had blown out in the Gulf of Mexico](#) and was on fire. Eleven men were dead. BP began dumping dispersants (toxic chemicals that sink oil) into the Gulf and lies into the media.**

I had left Alaska on February 10 for another round of national talks on the democracy crisis and how we can take back our government... [from the corporations](#). My phone went berserk with media requests. Lisa Marie, my assistant and friend, asked when I was going down to the Gulf. "I'm not," I said. She knew better.

For both of us, it was déjà vu. During the Exxon Valdez oil spill 21 years earlier in Alaska, Lisa Marie had worked with traumatized children and families. She worked for several years as a board member and volunteer for the Cordova Family Resource Center. With my doctorate in marine pollution, I became a spokesperson for the commercial fishing industry, testifying in the state legislature and Congress for stronger spill prevention measures and working to ban dispersants, and then starting the [Copper River Watershed Project](#) to help the community recover from long-term socioeconomic impacts. Lisa Marie knew I needed time to process my own memories that surged afresh with BP's blowout, the inept government-industry response, and the lies.

It took me a week to come out of my foxhole. I thought about all the mistakes our community had made after the Exxon-Valdez spill, of all that we'd learned during our decades of fighting. All of the communities in the Gulf will make the same mistakes, I thought glumly... unless someone warns them. Suddenly I realized that someone was me.

On May 3, Lisa Marie and I flew to New Orleans. She had a return ticket; I did not. Before the flight, a black limousine took me to a studio in Denver for an [interview with Amy Goodman on Democracy Now!](#); a black limousine picked us up in New Orleans for an interview with Anderson Cooper on AC 360. The pace didn't slow down for five months.

From May through early October, I drove back and forth across the Gulf, giving community talks and workshops that evolved with the needs:

### May

Shared Exxon Valdez stories and encouraged people to come up with a Plan B—how they could help themselves instead of waiting for BP or the federal government to make them whole as Exxon had promised, but failed, to do in Alaska.

*In the town of Jean Lafitte, one Cajun fisherman stopped me mid-talk and begged, “Miss Riki, c-a-a-a-lm down!” A week later, my southern hosts had figured out how to “handle” me: “Miss Riki, she’s high-strung. You gotta sit ‘er down and feed ‘er!” That worked.*

## **June**

Ordinary folks across the Gulf are turning to covert operations, grabbing cameras to document and report oil sightings and dispersant use in coastal seas.

Encouraged people to take air and water quality samples to document the damage from the spill and the threat to human health (the federal agencies’ sampling programs found nothing to support the outbreak of respiratory illnesses and skin “rashes” that residents were experiencing). We amassed documentation of "disappeared" evidence.

*A security guard in Florida hid behind bushes to take photos of BP-contracted Waste Management employees dumping wildlife carcasses in a dumpster. She sent the photos from her cell phone. “You can see the bush in the picture!” says Lisa Marie.*

## **July**

Encouraged people to take blood samples to link their illnesses with the high levels of oil and dispersants thents they were finding in their air and water. They tested outdoor swimming pools, rain, bayous, and beach sand.

*Ordinary folks across the Gulf are turning to covert operations, grabbing cameras to document and report oil sightings and dispersant use in coastal seas. One grandmother tells me, “I’m too old for this!” But she keeps feeding me information.*

## **August**

Following massive use of oil dispersants in heavily populated coastal areas, dealt with extremely sick (and now dying) people. (The federal government and BP still deny this occurred, though federal investigators now have documentation. I believe the spraying was done to keep up appearances that the oil was "gone"—conveniently in time for mid-term elections.) Found medical doctors to properly diagnose and treat people as doctors in the Gulf were diagnosing anything but chemical illnesses. Encouraged those [challenging re-opening of commercial fisheries](#), as they were still finding lots of evidence of oil and dispersants.

*In Bayou La Batre, Alabama, two state officials tried to convince an audience of fishermen that it was okay to fish in coastal waters. Finally, one exasperated fellow boomed into the microphone, “I am a coon ass, not a dumb ass!”*

## **September and October**

Same as August.

BP and the Coast Guard call the oil that still washes ashore “algae.” It’s not.

*In Louisiana, folks are calling the renamed Mineral Management Services, an agency captured by the oil industry it is charged with regulating, “Bummer”—for Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation, and Enforcement (BOEMRE). It fits. BP and the Coast Guard call the oil that still washes ashore “algae.” It’s not. The new joke in Louisiana is to go to BP stations and ask them to fill up and*

check the “algae.”

In mid-October, I resumed the national tour that was interrupted in April, finally finding my way home on December 6 after being gone for 290 days! Cordovans showered me with thank-yous, hugs, and “atta girls.” It felt great.

## Now

Now I’m back in the Gulf. There’s a lot on my list, from continuing the work of banning dispersants to finding a university that will partner with community organizations to conduct a 20-year study on the health impacts of the spill on Gulf residents.



["Action is the Antidote to Despair"](#)

Photo essay: A photographer confronts the BP oil disaster.

The story isn’t over. Indeed, this story has the potential to [unite Americans in a serious commitment to transition off fossil fuels](#), starting with a permanent ban on deepwater offshore drilling. It’s also [an opportunity to confront the dangerous expansion of corporate power](#)—for the people I’ve met here, watching the government protect BP instead of them has been more instructive than anything I could tell them.

It’s not too late to make sure the outcome of this spill is not, as it was twenty years ago, a return to “oil business as usual.”

[Click here](#) to learn more about what you can do and get Gulf updates from Riki Ott.



Riki Ott, PhD, wrote this article for [YES! Magazine](#), a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Riki has written two books on the Exxon Valdez oil spill's impacts on people, communities, and wildlife, including the recently released [Not One Drop: Betrayal and Courage in the Wake of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill](#). A marine toxicologist and former fisherwoman, she is a national spokesperson with [Move To Amend](#), a grassroots campaign advocating constitutional amendments to restrict corporate power.

## Interested?

- [A Crisis of Democracy: Real Solutions to the BP Oil Spill](#)  
For Gulf residents, the BP oil spill has made the problem of unchecked corporate power painfully clear. Exxon Valdez survivor Riki Ott on why this may be the moment to overcome our political divides and take back our democracy.
- [John Francis: Walking Away From Oil](#)  
When an oil spill coated birds in San Francisco Bay 40 years ago, he quit driving. Then he quit speaking. Madeline Ostrander asked him what he learned in that process that can help us deal with the BP oil spill.

- [Read more](#) YES! Magazine articles about the BP oil disaster.

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