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Gulf of Mexico Has Long Been a Dump Site for Industry

By CAMPBELL ROBERTSON

HOUMA, La. — Loulan Pitre Sr. was born on the Gulf Coast in 1921, the son of an oysterman. Nearly all his life, he worked on the water, abiding by the widely shared faith that the resources of the Gulf of Mexico were limitless.

As a young Marine staff sergeant, back home after fighting in the South Pacific, he stood on barges in the gulf and watched as surplus mines, bombs and ammunition were pushed over the side.

He helped build the gulf's very first offshore oil drilling platforms in the late 1940s, installing bolts on perilously high perches over the water. He worked on a shrimp boat, and later as the captain of a service boat for drilling platforms.

The gulf has changed, Mr. Pitre said: "I think it's too far gone to salvage."

The BP oil spill has sent millions of barrels gushing into the Gulf of Mexico, focusing international attention on America's third coast and prompting questions about whether it will ever fully recover from the spill.

Now that the oil on the surface appears to be dissipating, the notion of a recovery from the spill, repeated by politicians, strikes some here as short-sighted. The gulf had been suffering for decades before the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig on April 20.

"There's a tremendous amount of outrage with the oil spill, and rightfully so," said Felicia Coleman, director of Florida State University's Coastal and Marine Laboratory. "But where's the outrage at the thousands and millions of little cuts we've made on a daily basis?"

The gulf is one of the most diverse ecosystems in the hemisphere, a stopping point for migratory birds from South America to the Arctic, home to abundant wildlife and natural resources.

But like no other American body of water, the gulf bears the environmental consequences of the country's economic pursuits and appetites, including oil and corn.

There are around 4,000 offshore oil and gas platforms and tens of thousands of miles of pipeline in the central and western Gulf of Mexico, where 90 percent of the country's offshore drilling takes place.

At least half a million barrels of oil and drilling fluids had been spilled offshore before the gusher that began after the April 20 explosion, according to government records.

Much more than that has been spilled from pipelines, vessel traffic and wells in state waters — including hundreds of spills in Louisiana alone — records show, some of it since April 20.

Runoff and waste from cornfields, sewage plants, golf courses and oil-stained parking lots drain into the Mississippi River from vast swaths of the United States, and then flow down to the gulf, creating a zone of lifeless water the size of Lake Ontario just off the coast of Louisiana.

The gulf's floor is littered with bombs, chemical weapons and other ordnance dumped in the middle of last century, even in areas busy with drilling, and miles outside of designated dumping zones, according to experts who work on deepwater hazard surveys.

The likelihood of an accident is low, experts said, but they added that federal hazard mitigation requirements are not strong enough to guarantee the safety of drillers working in the gulf.

Even the coast itself — overdeveloped, strip-mined and battered by storms — is falling apart. The wildlife-rich coastal wetlands of Louisiana, sliced up and drastically engineered for oil and gas exploration, shipping and flood control, have lost an area larger than Delaware since 1930.

“This has been the nation’s sacrifice zone, and has been for 50-plus years,” said Aaron Viles, campaign director for the [Gulf Restoration Network](#), a nonprofit group. “What we’re seeing right now with BP’s crude is just a very photogenic representation of that.”

History of Neglect

All along the coast, people speak of a lack of regulatory commitment and investment in scientific research on the gulf by state and federal lawmakers.

They note, for example, that over the last decade, the [Environmental Protection Agency’s](#) financing for the Chesapeake Bay Program, a regional and federal partnership, was nearly five times the amount for a similar Gulf of Mexico program, and a Great Lakes program was given more than four times as much.

“The funding had never been equivalent to other great water bodies,” said [Lisa Jackson](#), the administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency. “That’s absolutely true. But it’s also absolutely true that this administration changed that long before the spill.”

While the Gulf of Mexico program financing remains at roughly the same levels, Ms. Jackson pointed to other programs to address gulf health that have been created and received tens of millions of dollars in the last two years.

On July 19, the Obama administration announced the recommendations of the [Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force](#), a committee created in 2009 to coordinate governance over the country’s major bodies of water.

The White House also announced the creation of a gulf restoration road map before the spill to address the long-term problems on the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts.

The details of some of these federal plans remain vague, and the financing is viewed as just a start, but they have raised hopes of a more effective federal approach to the gulf’s problems — an approach that has long been missing, say scientists, lawyers and environmental advocates here.

Ms. Jackson added that it is not all about money. Some of the key coastal issues, like control of the Mississippi River, present thorny jurisdictional complications between the federal government and the states.

And while billions of dollars would be required to restore the coast — much more than has already been committed — the maintenance of a healthy gulf also demands rigorous enforcement of regulations.

Some of the strongest resistance to tough regulation, as well as the [most permissive attitude toward industry](#) and property development, has come from the Gulf States themselves.

While the states formed an alliance in 2004 to address the gulf’s overall health, the group includes some of the poorest states in the country, and they are concerned that tighter rules could chase away jobs.

In a [federal ranking](#) of states for annual toxic release, 3 of the top 10 are along the gulf.

This has led to a cycle of lax oversight. Members of several national environmental groups said they had found much of the gulf a hostile fund-raising and political atmosphere — a point echoed by Paul Templet, a former secretary of the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality.

“They don’t have any support in state government,” Mr. Templet said of the groups. “They do a cost-benefit analysis, and they decide to spend their money elsewhere.”

A Regional Difference

But without the aggressive watchdog role played by well-financed environmental groups in places like California and the Mid-Atlantic, threats to the gulf have largely gone unmonitored.

Kieran Suckling, a founder of the [Center for Biological Diversity](#), said he was shocked in the days after the Deepwater Horizon spill to discover the United States [Minerals Management Service](#)’s lax oversight of the offshore drilling industry.

“The blatant, extremely public actions of the M.M.S. would not survive for 10 minutes if they were doing this very same thing in the Northeast or the Pacific Northwest,” he said.

But his organization, like many others, did not have an office on the gulf.

“The environmental movement was either so far removed from it that it was unaware, or it was aware and afraid to challenge it because of local politics,” Mr. Suckling said. “Or it was unwilling to challenge because it has written off the gulf as America’s dumping ground.”

By the time the environmental movement gained steam, in the 1970s, the Gulf of Mexico had already established a reputation as a place where the country did its dirty work.

Oil and gas companies have been drilling offshore in the central and western gulf for more than 60 years, providing tens of thousands of jobs for states with ailing agrarian economies.

In that time, only the Ixtoc I spill off Mexico in 1979 has come close to the Deepwater Horizon disaster. But still, a report from the Ocean Studies Board and other federal scientific advisory groups found that the waters of the northwestern gulf take on more oil on average per year, from spills, natural seeps and land-based sources like coastal refineries and everyday transportation, than any other North American marine waters.

According to data from the Minerals Management Service compiled and analyzed by Toxics Targeting, a firm that documents pollution and contamination, at least 324 spills involving offshore drilling have occurred in the gulf since 1964, releasing more than 550,000 barrels of oil and drilling-related substances. Four of these spills even involved earlier equipment failures and accidents on the Deepwater Horizon rig. Thousands of tons of produced water — a drilling byproduct that includes oil, grease and heavy metals — are dumped into the gulf every year. The discharges are legal and regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency.

But in the early 1990s, Robert Wiygul, an environmental lawyer who works on the Gulf Coast, brought at least a half-dozen lawsuits against companies that were found to be dumping produced water in shallow areas along the coast without any permit at all, citing little to no enforcement by the E.P.A. and little concern from regional politicians.

The E.P.A. later tightened regulations, including an outright ban on dumping produced waters near shore. But Mr. Wiygul described the situation as typical.

“If you’d had high-level politicians saying, ‘Y’all need to do this, this needs to happen,’ you would have seen a different situation there,” he said.

A Double-Edged Sword

Some of the alternatives to oil and gas could present their own problems to the gulf. While many farm groups, along with the Obama administration, are pushing for an expansion of ethanol-based fuels, such an expansion could mean more corn grown in the Midwest. That in turn could mean more nitrogen-rich fertilizer pouring into the gulf from the Mississippi River.

The nitrogen discharged into the Mississippi — 1.5 million tons of it yearly, from fertilizer, as well as urban runoff and sewage plants — creates a feeding frenzy among the phytoplankton when it enters the gulf. When the phytoplankton decompose, oxygen in the water is reduced so significantly that little life can exist.

That [man-made area of dead water](#), called a hypoxic zone, is second in size only to a similar zone in the Baltic Sea. And its source, for the most part, is in states hundreds of miles from the gulf.

“One of the problems with the gulf as an ecosystem is its insults come from so damn far away,” said Oliver Houck, a lawyer at the [Tulane Environmental Law Clinic](#) in New Orleans.

The Clean Water Act has been effective at regulating “point source” pollution from specific factories and waste plants. But the act leaves much up to the states when it comes to regulating more diffuse sources of pollution, like runoff. And agricultural runoff is explicitly exempt from regulation under the act.

That does not mean that the states and the E.P.A. are powerless to curtail upstream pollution, said Nancy Rabalais, an expert on gulf hypoxia and executive director of the [Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium](#). They just have been reluctant to do so in the past.

She said some positive steps had been made recently, including a new four-year, \$320 million federal initiative dedicated to substantially reducing the nitrogen coming into the gulf by working with agricultural states upriver. But the plan is only a start, she said, and she has not seen the states along the Mississippi, including those in the gulf, push for the financing needed to make a measurable difference.

Mr. Pitre is skeptical that anything will change, given the economic realities. The BP spill aside, much of the damage to the gulf has been gradual and piecemeal. And people still believe that the gulf is big enough to absorb it.

“You can fool people,” Mr. Pitre said. “But you can’t fool the fish.”