



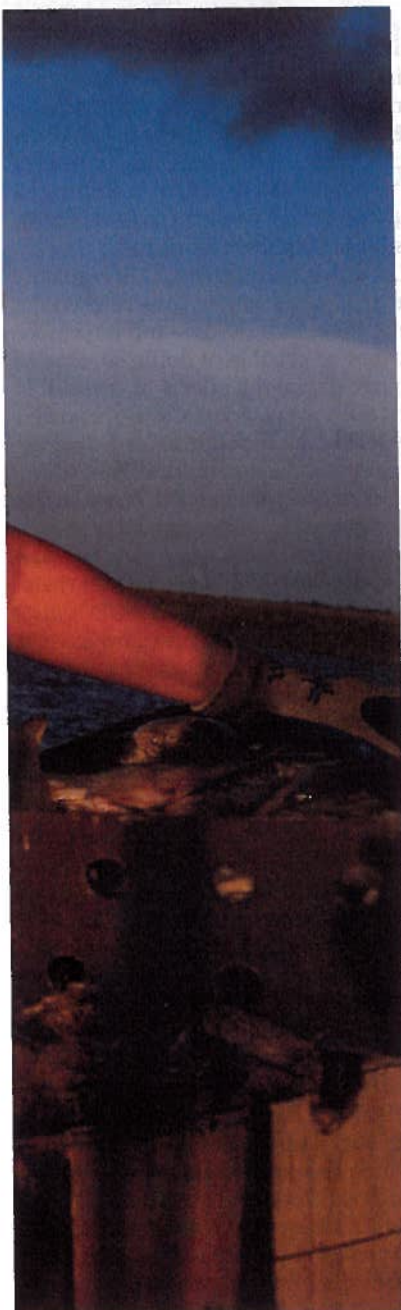
ENVIRONMENT

The Spill's Psychic Toll

For all the environmental and economic harm caused by the disaster in the Gulf, the most lasting—and least visible—damage could be inflicted on the mental health of its victims

BY BRYAN WALSH/NEW ORLEANS

Photographs by Matt Slaby for TIME



The Landrys

Location: St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana

Profession: Lifelong crabbers off the southeastern-Louisiana coast

Family: The spill put a halt to fishing at the height of the season, and the long-term impact is impossible to predict. That's left the Landrys—like many others in the region—dealing with stress and uncertainty



AT J.F. GAUTHIER ELEMENTARY School, east of New Orleans, the kids of St. Bernard Parish are doing what kids are supposed to do in the summer: playing. Some of the older boys are shooting hoops; others are throwing a football to—well, at—one another. Younger children are getting a faceful of finger paint. Nearly all of them are buzzing with energy; an attempt by some of the adults on hand to gather them for lunch is futile.

But look closer. The friendly woman serving potato salad at the lunch line is a counselor, here to talk with anyone who needs it. The finger painting? It's art therapy, to help the kids get in touch with their feelings about the BP oil spill, now more than 100 days old. This impromptu summer camp has been arranged by the St. Bernard Project, a community group that has begun augmenting its main work, rebuilding houses for Hurricane Katrina victims, with classes in stress relief.

"The kids look all right," says Parker Sternbergh, a social worker at Tulane University, as she scans the children at play. "But sit down with them and you can feel the stress they're all under."

These children may be the youngest victims of the disaster, but they're hardly the only ones. You can read the stress in the tired, worried faces of their mothers too. They fear for their husbands in the fishing industry, who face a bitter choice between unemployment and taking a cleanup job with BP, the company they hate. They fear for their kids, who have been living with the spill since spring and will continue to do so for months and years to come. "There's so much tension in the family now, and the wives have to deal with all of it," says Yvonne Landry, a St. Bernard native who helped organize the camp. "All you can do is take it day by day—but you can't recover from what hasn't ended yet."

It was cheering to see BP finally record some success over the past few weeks in fixing its blown well, but for Gulf residents, that seeming ending is little more than a continuation of the beginning. And just as the worst environmental impact of the spill could be occurring out of sight, in the depths of the Gulf, the most lasting potential social damage is invisible too: anxiety and anger that erode community ties and the very psyches of the residents.

Already there's a spike in demand for counseling, as well as increased reports of stress, excessive drinking and domestic vi-

olence. For a region that was still recovering from the serial traumas of hurricanes Katrina, Ike and Gustav, the spill couldn't have happened at a worse time. "These people are in crisis, and it's not coming across in the images we see on TV," says Dr. Irwin Redlener, the director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University and the co-founder of the Children's Health Fund. "This is ground zero for psychological catastrophe."

Disaster Déjà Vu

THOUGH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA OF the Gulf spill is just starting to become apparent, disaster experts know what to expect, because they've seen it before. The 1989 *Exxon Valdez* spill inflicted a psychic wound on the residents of Alaska's Prince William Sound that still aches more than 20 years after the tanker ran aground.

Like southern Louisiana, Alaskan towns were full of fishermen whose way of life was threatened. Residents saw coastal waters fouled by millions of barrels of oil, and they raged against an incompetent response from government and industry. Previously close-knit communities were divided—those who took well-paying cleanup jobs with Exxon were derided as "spillionaires" profiting from the catastrophe. And the wounds did not heal with time: a recent study found that stress levels among Alaskans involved in the oil-spill litigation were as high in 2009 as they were in 1991. "There are still significant levels of depression and posttraumatic stress," says J. Steven Picou, a sociologist at the University of South Alabama. "It was a constantly renewing disaster."

By its nature, a man-made disaster like an oil spill differs from a natural one like an earthquake—and it can cause far more psychological havoc. The difference, in a word, is blame: while no one can really be at fault for a natural disaster, victims of man-made catastrophes have plenty of places to point fingers. That creates anger, and as it builds and builds, it leads to what Picou calls "corrosive communities."

Further, in natural disasters, the suffering is more egalitarian, with everyone affected more or less equally. That can help a community rebuild, as happened to an extent after Katrina—even if the fecklessness of the federal response complicated things. But that's not the case after an oil spill; fishermen see their way of life destroyed, while other residents are barely affected. A sense of injustice stokes anger, which, says



Rich tradition Yvonne Landry hosts a crab feast—one of the perks for fishing families

Dr. Elmore Rigamer, the medical director of Catholic Charities in New Orleans, “is a killer emotion. It’s like going around with a closed fist full of crunched glass.”

That sharp, chronic pain can quickly turn into depression—something that’s already occurring in Gulf Coast fishing communities. Darla Mooks, a 47-year-old shrimp-boat captain from Port Sulphur in southeastern Louisiana, says she’s barely sleeping these days. With no shrimp to catch, she has only one other potential source of income: a cleanup job with BP—but Mooks hasn’t been able to get one because, she charges, of gender discrimination. “I don’t know how I’m going to get through it,” she says while smoking a cigarette outside a town-hall meeting in Port Sulphur. “We have to, but I don’t know how.”

The trauma would be bad enough if, as with the *Exxon Valdez*, there had been a single spill. But the BP disaster has gone on for weeks, each day—until recently—bringing a fresh supply of oil. The underwater-camera feeds were an around-the-clock reminder of that. For Gulf residents, it was as if they’d been mugged and then forced to watch a video of the crime on an endless loop.

After just a little bit of this, trust erodes: Who in the Gulf believes BP when it says it will make things right or the government

when it promises that chemical dispersants aren’t toxic? Finally—inevitably—comes the fracturing of the community. Travel around southern Louisiana and you’ll hear complaints that BP isn’t handing out cleanup jobs fairly, that some captains are getting all the work and others are getting nothing. “We’re a community,” said Acy Cooper, vice president of the Louisiana Shrimp Association, at a hearing in New Orleans for the national oil-spill commission. “This isn’t fair, and it has to change.”

How to Heal

COMPLICATING THINGS FURTHER, MOST Gulf communities lack the mental-health resources to help spill victims recover from emotional damage. The folks at J.F. Gauthier Elementary School may be doing wonderful work, but it’s hardly typical of the region. Plaquemines Parish, in southeastern Louisiana—home to hard-hit fishing ports like Venice—has just a handful of available counselors, and while local governments have asked BP for money to fund mental-health programs, very little has arrived. (The company, characteristically dilatory, says it is considering what to fund.) Gulf states like Louisiana were already in the red before the spill; they don’t have the funds to pay for the mental care that will be needed. “Nongovernmental organizations and others are trying to provide services,” says Dr. Ben Springgate, executive director of community health at the Tulane School of Medicine. “But there’s simply no financial support so far.”

In the meantime, psychologists and other experts are working to determine where help should go when it becomes

available, launching studies to track the social impact of the spill and gauge the mental-health needs of communities. “We’re trying to utilize all the information we can,” says Dr. Howard Osofsky, head of the psychiatry department at Louisiana State University. “We have to do whatever possible to help these families.”

Until that help arrives, Gulf residents have to do what they’ve done before: take care of their own needs—and remember that they’re capable of doing so. One of the most damaging effects of the spill is that it takes away victims’ sense of power. They feel helpless before BP and the government—and even the oil itself, with its habit of disappearing and reappearing without warning. “That eats away at people,” says John Trumbaturi, a social worker in Plaquemines. “We want to help them improve their own coping skills.”

That’s the thinking behind the work of the St. Bernard Project and a similar community mental-health center opening in Plaquemines. Yvonne Landry knows that her friends and family in the region’s tight-knit fishing community are hurting, but that doesn’t mean they want to open up. “The men will never talk to a counselor,” she says. But if they’re leery of professionals, local men might be willing to open up to one another in peer counseling sessions like the kind she’s been involved with in the St. Bernard Project. “We can talk to each other, just sit down and breathe,” Landry says.

Indeed, if anyone can bounce back from the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history, it is the people of this region, who’ve survived hurricanes, corrupt state governments, the once hopeless New Orleans Saints and more. But surviving and eventually thriving may require residents to let go of their anger and perhaps even put aside a quest for legal justice. One of the most surprising findings from Picou’s *Exxon Valdez* research was that the biggest predictor of sustained stress years after the event wasn’t whether you were a fisherman or lived close to the spill but whether you were involved in a lawsuit. Fighting Exxon in court led to what Picou calls a “secondary disaster,” as litigants were forced to relive the spill over and over.

That’s why traumatized Gulf residents might be smart to listen to Kenneth Feinberg, the gruff Boston lawyer overseeing the \$20 billion spill-compensation fund. “The people of Louisiana are pretty resilient,” he said at a town-hall meeting in Port Sulphur recently. “Get a check, and move on as best you can.” It’s not fair, but for the sake of their psyches—and their children’s—it might be the best advice they are going to get.



Threatened Way of Life

See more photos of the daily life of a crabbing family at time.com/crab_fishing