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# Activism in the Gulf Coast after the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

Sara Em Gassman

*University of New Hampshire - Main Campus*

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# **Activism in the Gulf Coast After the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill**

“Leaders who don’t just react passively, who have the courage to anticipate crises or to act early, and who make strong insightful decisions of top-down management really can make a huge difference to their societies. So can similarly courageous, active citizens practicing bottom-up management.”

--Jared Diamond, *Collapse*

Sara Em Gassman  
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Advisor: Dr. Thomas Safford, Sociology

## **Introduction**

On April 20, 2010 the Deepwater Horizon oilrig in the Gulf of Mexico exploded, killing 11 workers and spilling an estimated five million barrels of oil into the ocean over the subsequent 86 days (The New York Times, 2011). Much of the response to the spill in terms of ecosystem restoration, control of the fishing industry and safety and the future of energy exploration and production in the United States was and continues to be directed by state and federal governments. Several special commissions and appointees hold the responsibility of managing the situation as best they can. This type of governmental control has left the ever-growing network of environmental and social justice activists along the Gulf Coast feeling disenfranchised and even less in control of the situation. As a result, activists have been pressuring those in power for seats at the table to express localized concerns for the current and future states of their health, environment and livelihoods.

The role of the general public, referred to herein as those who are not technical experts and who do not hold elected, government positions, can be divided into three sectors relative to Deepwater Horizon activism. The first form of activism includes public participation in response to mandates from environmental legislation, for instance submitting comments to a regulatory body regarding a proposal, or providing a testimony at a public hearing. Second, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involve large numbers of people from a community and are able to formalize and magnify public participation efforts, in government or at the grassroots level, within the scope of a specific interest. Finally, individuals who do not identify with the objectives of a specific group or do not see government-prompted comments as an effective way to make change in their society or send their message to those with formalized power (elected officials), act independently from others and the system.

On a national and even global scale, Gulf Coast activism in all its forms holds the role as inspiring and further empowering for those who are speaking out against new and potentially harmful energy development, from hydraulic fracturing to tar sands extraction to mountaintop removal coal mining.

The continuance of offshore drilling and other newer and less traditional methods of energy production are direct results of American culture and the influence of capitalism. Ninety-two percent of American households owned at least one vehicle in 2001 (Bureau of Transportation Statistics). The consumerism-based, oil-driven values of American society use this resource at a rate of over nineteen million barrels per day (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2011), a rate that, given traditional sources and extraction methods, cannot be sustained indefinitely. However, over time, American culture has not only increasingly encouraged technological innovation to solve or remediate environmental problems, it has become increasingly dependent on such advances.

The activist culture that has arisen in America, including community and nationally-based nongovernmental organizations, has helped to lessen, mitigate and repair damages caused by energy and industrial development. In times when governments are slow to pass legislation or are failing to meet the needs of the people, the people have stood up for themselves, exercising the freedom of speech and the right to assemble to make the economic and social changes that they need. These themes will be discussed in detail in later sections.

In addition to the clear and immediate threats of fossil fuel extraction, for instance deadly oilrig blowouts and leakage of oil into bodies of water, there are wider-reaching repercussions for the actual use of fossil fuels. (The New York Times, 2011). Combustion of fossil fuels releases heat-trapping gases such as carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. This contributes to sea

level rise, ocean acidification and extreme weather patterns, among other dangerous and threatening conditions for people and the planet. The current level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is 391 parts per million (ppm), but by recommendations from leading climate scientist James Hansen, a safe level of carbon dioxide would be 350 ppm. This can be achieved by moving away from combustion of fossil fuels and changing the way that humans use land (350.org). In so-called frontline communities, for instance neighborhoods surrounding power plants, residents are exposed to toxic and carcinogenic emissions that pose a variety of threats to human health and well-being, for instance respiratory issues (Zeller, 2011).

Localized and global threats to human and environmental health are potential motivating factors for people to organize and collaborate for change toward a more just living situation.

### **Historical Background: Oil Spills and Activism**

On January 28, 1969, off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, the Union Oil rig blew out, releasing 100,000 barrels of oil over the next eleven months (NOAA / Hazardous Materials Response and Assessment Division, 1992). This event closed area fisheries between February and April 1969. Clean-up costs reached \$4.5 million. Such disasters of this scale were unprecedented, and legislation regarding clean up and reparation responsibility was vague or nonexistent. Community members upset with the response to the oil spill and looking to make legal changes for the future coordinated to form Get Oil Out! (GOO!), which led letter-to-the-editor campaigns, rallies and sent a petition against offshore drilling with 110,000 signatures to President Richard M. Nixon (Molotch, 1970). For a significant amount of time after the spill, there was national media coverage of the oiled coastlines and the negatively affected Santa Barbara community, inspiring offshoot groups of anti-oil activists across the nation (Molotch,

1970). Not only were these groups formed, they were effective at initiating local and federal legislation—with environmental issues in the public eye and lots of grassroots organizing power behind them, politicians gained support by presenting environmental bills in the legislature (Christofferson, 2004).

In April of 1970, the first Earth Day events were held. Over 20 million Americans participated in clean-up and community-building events celebrating the planet and moving to protect it. Remarking on the effect of Earth Day 1970, Denis Hayes said, “It was a huge high adrenaline effort that in the end genuinely changed things. Before there were people that opposed freeways, there were people that opposed clear-cutting, or people worried about pesticides. They didn’t think of themselves as having anything in common. After Earth Day they were all part of an environmental movement” (Stone, 2009). Over the months and years following the Santa Barbara spill and Earth Day 1970, twenty-eight federal laws were passed preserving open space and mandating the protection of air and water quality (Christofferson, 2004). The Santa Barbara oil spill was the event that sparked the critical mass to continue the Earth Day excitement and build the American environmental movement of the 1970s. This movement carried through the next several decades resulting in increased air and water quality and successful anti-littering campaigns. At the time of the Santa Barbara oil spill, the political and cultural climates of the United States were right for activists and elected officials to work together to pressure industry and individuals to change their behaviors for the betterment of the environment. Specifically, the Environmental Protection Agency was formed under President Nixon and President Jimmy Carter put solar panels on the White House. Political leadership on environmental issues dwindled with the election of President Ronald Reagan. Most symbolically, President Reagan removed the solar panels from the White House (Stone, 2009).

Though legislative victories were few during and after Reagan's presidency, the network of individuals and organizations committed to the environment continued and expanded. Grassroots campaigns to protect and conserve persisted on a smaller, but simultaneously broader-reaching scale. Chapters of the Student Environmental Action Coalition formed on one thousand high school and college campuses nationwide to tackle issues such as recycling and responsible food sourcing, and held direct actions against industrial polluters (Loeb, 1994). Between the passing of the last of the twenty-eight post-Earth Day laws and present day, energy development in the United States grew immensely and in ways Earth Day 1970 participants probably could not even imagine. Countless studies were conducted regarding carbon in the atmosphere and toxins in the water. Corporate power over the American government and ultimately the American people was growing. The reasons for a second wave of the environmental movement were ever increasing.

Based on analyses of historic, wide-spread social movements, theorists have identified several pre-existing conditions necessary to start a social movement: an established communication network; members of the network must be like-minded and open to new ideas of the movement; and finally, either when a "co-optable" network of like-minded people exists, a crisis event, or if the network is sub-optimal, then skillful organizers to spread information to spark a movement (Freeman, 2009). The Deepwater Horizon blowout has the potential to be the event that mobilizes networks and starts a social movement against dirty energy extraction.

### **Social Theory and the Environment**

Environmental issues are inherently complex. Moving forward from a disaster such as the Deepwater Horizon blowout affects not only those in the oil industry but also the recreational

and commercial fishing industries, ecologists, tourists on beaches and people participating in recreational activities along the coastlines, among an endless list of others. One way to focus the analysis of the situation is to identify one standout, driving force among culture, capital or power, in the society and approach the issue in that way.

### *Conservative Paradigm*

Based on the theories of Emile Durkheim comes the conservative paradigm, that culture and the way a society is organized influence the way that society manipulates or uses the resources of their environment (Humphrey, Lewis, & Buttel, 2002). Similarly, under the conservative paradigm, cultural characteristics such as innovation and dependence on technology are imperative to overcoming environmental challenges. The reliance on technology to mitigate environmental problems, however, makes the use of new methods of energy extraction seem less threatening than they could potentially be, since medicine can be used to heal those the method might hurt, while accidents and machine malfunctions can be controlled by still more technology.

### *Radical Paradigm*

The radical paradigm, resultant of the theories of Karl Marx, places capital as the causal force in society and identifies the profit motive as the driving force behind environmental destruction (Humphrey, Lewis, & Buttel, 2002). An additional part of the radical paradigm distinguishes “transformative agents” who aim to “make bureaucratic elites...environmentally responsible for their actions” (Humphrey, Lewis, & Buttel, 2002). Under the radical paradigm, in order to change the relationship between humans and the environment, a serious shift in values

must occur that places people at the same level of importance as other animals and natural resources.

### *Managerial Paradigm*

The managerial paradigm is based on the theories of Max Weber and identifies power as the causal force in society. Facets of this paradigm include the domination and power of persuasion the elite have over their subordinates, and their ability to use culture and common values to convince their subordinates that the decisions they are making are valid and in everyone's best interests (Humphrey, Lewis, & Buttel, 2002).

### *The Crucial Weberian Question*

Social theorist Max Weber identifies power as the basic causal force in society. From his work comes the "crucial Weberian" question: "can state officials in bureaucracies such as environmental regulatory agencies exercise power and regulate often powerful corporate polluters for the benefit of public health, safety, and the environment itself?" (Humphrey, Lewis, & Buttel, 2002). Subsequently, in the case that it becomes apparent that bureaucracies in fact cannot adequately protect the environment, can the people? This essay seeks to answer those questions as they relate to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in April 2010 and energy exploration across the United States.

### *Social Movement Theory*

Social theorists point to economically-based principles as reasons for individuals to become involved in social movements—that individuals act rationally and in their own interests;

on a larger scale, organizations act rationally to further their collective interests with greater power. Much of this participation is contingent not upon personal gains from the bettering of a situation (an organization lobbying for a law for better labeling of a food product for instance) but on incentives for participation beyond the satisfaction of reaching the goal (Olson, 2009). Studies of historical and wide-reaching social movements indicate that individuals are more likely to work toward a cause if they know someone else who is participating in the movement, and if they are in a comfortable economic state already (McAdam, 2009).

In terms of Gulf Coast activism, organizations that were already involved in coastal restoration projects and clean energy development were able to shift their focus to spill-related tasks and had even more timely and legitimate reasons for working to improve the coastal environment. These networks were important too for organizing the responsive participation efforts because the intermediary ties between the general public and the government already existed and coastal residents knew whom to contact or to join as a concerned citizen.

### **Gulf Coast Perceptions, Post-Spill**

In summer 2010, the University of New Hampshire Carsey Institute conducted a survey of 1,000 residents in coastal Louisiana and Florida to gain a better understanding of residents' perceptions in the immediate wake of the spill (Ulrich, 2011). This data is incorporated into this study as a means of comparing the interests of coastal residents with the direction the United States government is moving in restoration and energy development as well as other types of endeavors.

## **Culture and Economy in America and the Gulf Coast**

According to U.S. Energy Information Administration, in 2009 the United States was the number one oil-consuming nation in the world, using over eighteen million barrels of oil per day. In that same year, the U.S. produced only about 7.5 million barrels daily (US DOE, 2011). This oil-addicted nation thus must import most of its required fuel. Canada is the top provider, followed by a collection of OPEC nations (US DOE, 2011). As political relations with some OPEC nations become tense and potentially unreliable, the general trend is toward increasing United States production of energy. Texas is the number one producer of crude oil in the U.S. and Louisiana is sixth (US DOE). Since the beginning of Barack Obama's presidential term, U.S. importation of oil has decreased steadily, with increased offshore and natural gas drilling to take its place (Slack, 2012). American energy independence is a continual theme in President Obama's addresses; to his administration, expanding oil and gas drilling, as well as initiating mandates for energy efficiency and transitioning vehicles to burn natural gas (Slack, 2012). The administration's main focus lies in tapping America's fossil fuel resources, with occasional renewable or "clean" energy projects including "wind, solar, biomass, hydropower, and nuclear" (Slack, 2012). Clearly, the government is invested in furthering the use of harmful fossil fuels to maintain the cultural status quo.

American cultural values and social institutions are ultimately based on fossil fuels, which are finite resources. Ninety-two percent of households in America own one or more vehicles, and over time the average number of miles that Americans travel have increased, indicating the capacity for an increase in gasoline usage (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2005). One solution to meeting this need and continuing the dependence on fossil fuels is to rely on technological innovation and deep earth extraction methods. At a

hearing of the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling in Washington, D.C. in November 2010, Commission co-chairman William Reilly drew attention to this type of technology and the inherent, serious risks of “sinking this well through a mile of water and two-and-a-half miles of rock” (Harris, 2010). This is an example of cultural dependence on technology and fossil fuels coalescing to drive forward this risky method of obtaining fossil fuels.

The downsides to fossil fuel extraction and the inability of technology to solve or prevent energy development problems have been showcased throughout time. In various situations, public response to negative events such as oil spills have indicated the ways in which people believe that environmental destruction is a result of energy extraction. In a Pew poll taken in May 2010, respondents answered the following question: “Do you think oil spills like the one in the Gulf of Mexico are unavoidable if the United States is going to get an adequate supply of energy, or don’t you think so?” Responses to this question were compared to responses to a similar question regarding the inevitability of a failure after the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989 (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010).

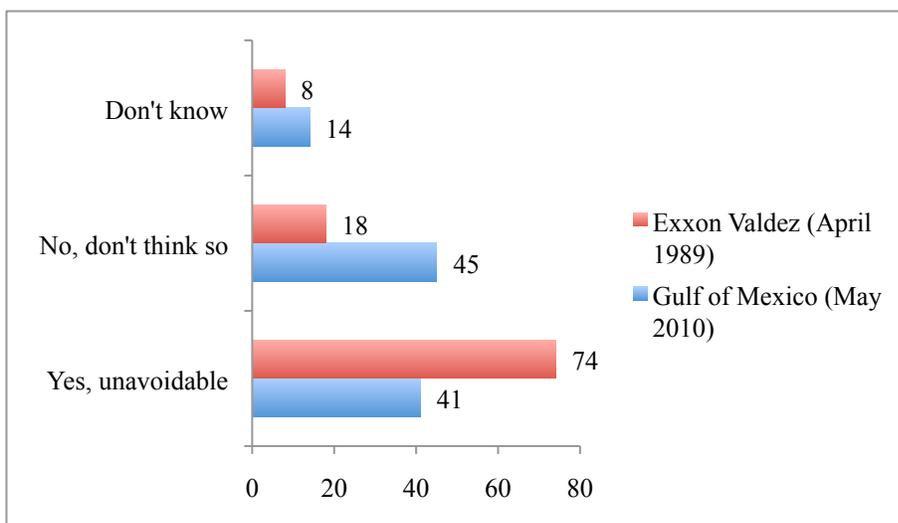


Figure 1. Responses to questions regarding Gulf of Mexico oil spill and Exxon Valdez spill as related to energy supply for US.

As shown in Figure 1, in the wake of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989, 74% of those taking the survey believed that oil spills were unavoidable. At the time of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, 41% believed spills were unavoidable, while 45% thought that spills were an avoidable side effect of acquiring energy (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010). This could be a result of the development of and confidence in new technologies over the past several decades that promise against or at least offer a “quick fix” to safety and environmental impacts. This sentiment could also be a result of public acceptance of oil spills as a necessary part of modern energy extraction. This aligns with the parameters of the Human Exemptionalism Paradigm, which include the assumption that “culture is cumulative; thus technological and social progress can continue indefinitely, making all social problems ultimately soluble” (Humphrey, Lewis, & Buttel, 2002). In this case, because a modern aspect of American culture is to put faith in technology to solve or prevent problems, the prospect of an oil spill seems less.

In trying to fix or react to problems such as oil spills, the tendency is to work toward having a better response plan for the next disaster, or developing a new technology to mitigate impact. This is a band-aid approach in that it fails to address the real root of the problem—that energy extraction is dangerous and poses real threats to the environment and to people. It is important to step back from the situation and consider ways to avoid the issue entirely, by considering other sources of energy entirely.

As a result of the Deepwater Horizon spill, President Barack Obama and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar issued an official seven-year moratorium on offshore drilling effective in December 2010 (Broder & Krauss, 2010). While this decision pleased environmentalists and upset the oil industry, it also had an impact on already affected Gulf Coast residents, keeping the estimated 320,000 people directly and indirectly employed by the oil industry unemployed for

even longer (Burnett, 2010). As a result of the temporary end of the oil industry, and the continued presence of oil and its effect on the fishing industry, Gulf Coast residents “are experiencing severe stress from the loss of their livelihood. Many are experiencing serious physical and mental health problems” (Schleifstein, 2010).

The nature of the identity crises Gulf Coast residents faced in the wake of the spill is similar to the challenges faced by other industry dependent regions throughout history. When a dominant industry in a small town shuts down and the people are left without alternative employment and an industry-specific skill set (Davis, 2002). Towns defined by a specific industry such as steel or logging or mining are severely affected when that industry uproots or ends entirely, as the townspeople rely on the industry not only for its economic benefit but also take pride in its every aspect and identify themselves as steel workers or oil rig workers or fishermen. Jobs in mills, at the coalmines or on the oilrigs are not just jobs, but well-revered lifestyles (Diamond, 2011).

There are plenty of models of communities that influenced the use of the environment in a way that is different than the infrastructure that already exists. For instance, strong local opposition and the motivation of preserving the cultural value of the quaint small New England town kept the development of a major highway from happening (Bullfrog Films). Some oil workers feel that oil jobs are not safe and not sustainable, and if they are able to confront Gulf planners, they will be able to create a society that better reflects their personal values and perhaps shape the values of the Gulf Coast of the future (Foytlin, 2011).

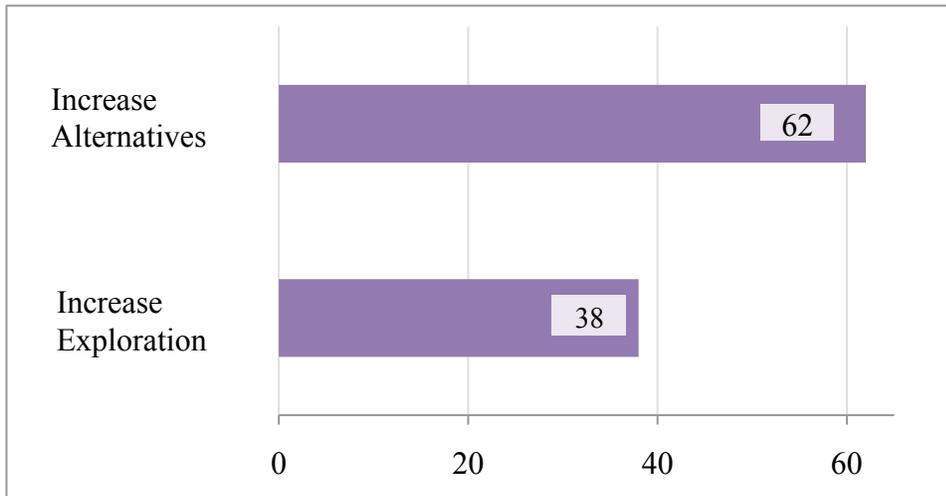
The loss, even if temporary, of such an influential industry is, of course, a struggle for Gulf Coast residents. However, the moratorium on deepwater drilling brings about the unique opportunity for public participation and government cooperation in planning for and developing

the future economic and social base of the region in a potentially more sustainable and socially just way. The moratorium offers time for reassessment and reconsideration of the costs and benefits of the oil industry on a number of scales, and from a variety of perspectives. Should Gulf states further encourage offshore oil development for its short term benefits such as jobs and revenue? Or should they more seriously consider its risks, environmental or otherwise? Most directly, and evidenced by the Deepwater Horizon incident, offshore oil accidents have the potential to affect not only wildlife and coastal habitat but also the fishing and tourism industries and the general health of the coastal population. Oil exploration places the global community at risk by enabling the addiction to and dependence on oil and further contributing to greenhouse gases. The moratorium provides the chance to consider the issue of oil spills as not just a necessary occurrence, but as perhaps a reason to shift gears and invest in other industry.

If and when the Gulf shifts its economic base from oil refineries and oil drilling operations, will residents lose their sense of identity and resist? Or will they readily adopt the identity of their new economy? In the paper “Beyond Recovery: Moving the Gulf Coast Toward a Sustainable Future,” published by Oxfam America and the Center for American Progress in February 2011, the authors make a series of recommendations for the establishment of coastal restoration and solar- and biomass-based infrastructure projects and plans. They repeatedly stress the need for sustained and effective public participation, which could help create a sense of agency and connection with the new economy and facilitate the overall transition (Gordon, Buchanan, & Singerman, 2011).

Based on the response to the Carsey Institute survey question, “Which do you think is more important, increased exploration for oil in the U.S., or increased use of solar, wind and alternative energy sources?,” finding this support may not be too difficult. Sixty-two percent of

those surveyed reported the importance of using alternative energy (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Results of Carsey Institute survey question regarding the importance of drilling for oil and increasing alternative energy sources.**

This indication of public interest thus may prove to be a motivating factor for collective citizen action.

### **Role of Public Participation in Federal Government Procedures**

Over time, a variety of tactics have been employed in attempting to solve environmental issues. These tactics have involved various types of social organizations from as basic as the individual to small town groups of concerned citizens to governments. In some cases, an environmental issue was resolved as a result of one type of organization pressuring another, while in other cases, the issue was resolved by a singular organization.

The Riverkeeper organization in New York’s Hudson Valley is a classic example of an organization that worked to get government to exercise its power against corporate polluters for the benefit of the general public. This group was created in 1966 “by a blue-collar association of commercial and recreational fishermen...to track down Hudson River polluters and bring them to justice” (Cronin & Kennedy). As a new organization taking action at the relative beginning of

the American Environmental Movement, the Riverkeepers were successful in reaching out to the general public—individual whistleblowers—who noticed industrial pollution in their beloved waterway. Using the volunteer labor of law students, and their networks of respected academic experts who could testify in court, the Riverkeepers were able to prevent development of the Storm King pump storage facility among other victories for the River and, importantly, for the people who use the River as a source of income and for recreation (Cronin & Kennedy).

Countless initiatives to restore the Gulf ecosystem, create jobs and change policy to prevent or better respond to similar situations in the future have been established by both state and federal governments and local and international non profit organizations. In some instances, corporations have provided funding. Community activist groups, individuals and the government have successfully enacted legislative changes to restore or preserve natural resources and air, water and land quality by working together and independently.

A key difference in the relationships between government and activists of the past versus of the present is that after past disasters, the general role of activists was to pressure the government to not only hold industry accountable for their pollution, but also to then create legislation to better manage a similar situation. As it stands presently, the role of the public is to ensure that government actually enforces the laws already in place. Current legislative guidelines for oil spill response have varying capacities of public participation opportunities written in. Several Gulf coast activist groups have been addressing not only the issues related to the oil disaster, but also the issues related to local voice in decisions moving forward.

### *Natural Resource Damage Assessment and National Environmental Policy Act*

Under the Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) protocol written under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA) and the Oil Pollution Act (OPA), federally designated trustees calculate the “monetary cost of restoring injuries to natural resources that result from releases of hazardous substances or discharges of oil” (US EPA, 2011). At all three stages of the NRDA process, the Pre-Assessment, Injury Assessment and Restoration Planning phases, scientists are heavily involved in gathering and interpreting data on behalf of the various trustees. Trustees for this particular NRDA include representatives from Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Each group of Trustees has its own NRDA workplans for gathering data and estimating the cost of damage to wildlife and natural resources. In an agreement reached in April 2011, BP will initially provide one billion dollars for initial restoration projects and continue to provide funding, along with any other parties found responsible for natural resource injury, when the actual compensation for the damage is fully assessed (US EPA, 2011).

Though the NRDA Trustees decided how the one billion dollars was divided among them, Texas trustee Carter Smith, executive director of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department stated, “there will be a public process in Texas and throughout the Gulf to consider and identify projects that make the best use of these funds for our coastal habitats and the fish, wildlife and people who depend upon them” (US EPA, 2011). Trustees recognized the need to consult the public for input on ways to use the compensatory money. There is also an environmental justice component of NRDA, under which communities comprised primarily of minority and low-

income residents must be considered for any given project to avoid disproportionately affecting them, as has been the historic trend (DARRP, 2010).

On a website with content specific to the Deepwater Horizon spill, NOAA provides a comprehensive listing of ways for the public to get involved in restoration efforts. NOAA lists and clearly solicits public input at eleven NRDA-related public hearings held in the five Gulf States and Washington, D.C. in spring 2011. Over 500 total community members attended the meetings, expressing concerns for wildlife, fisheries, recreation opportunities and barrier islands among other topics.

While it seems on the surface that public hearings are a relatively effective way for government to quantify public sentiment regarding how to spend the NRDA money, public participation experts critique the typically narrow focus and directed nature of these hearings, in which “the agency defines the agenda and establishes the format...[providing] limited time for citizens to understand the technical or policy issues and to take a substantive part in the discussion” (Kinsella, 2004). However, by making the information widely available ahead of time, the public has time to digest the information and make directed and effective comments.

NOAA actively updates those interested in the latest decisions or calls for comments via an email list. NOAA also provides email and postal addresses for comments from concerned citizens who are not able to attend the public meetings (NOAA, 2011). While NOAA has the power, political standing and factual data to recommend policies and projects for the long term, coastal residents have the person power to effect immediate change on the beaches, thus, NOAA provides information on ways people can physically volunteer by cleaning beaches or reporting affected wildlife.

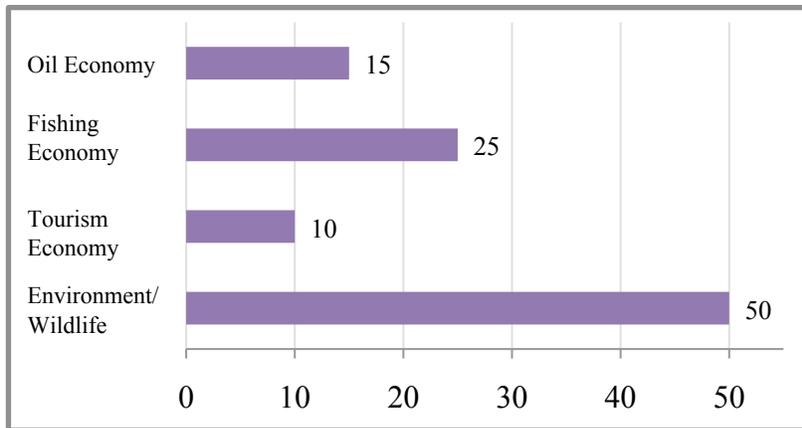
In many situations regarding natural resource use and protection, the government is the entity to make final decisions with relatively few and relatively ineffectual opportunities for the public to offer support or dissent. For development projects such as construction or fossil fuel extraction, there must legally be a public comment period as part of the National Environmental Policy Act's Environmental Impact Statement process (US EPA, 2011). For the NRDA process, the public meetings and opportunities for input and the fact that the public is taking advantage of them is important. Gulf Coast residents are using the meetings to exercise the power of their voices. This pattern of communication between the government and the people is important in a democratic society, as it allows this system of power distribution to continue to be legitimized—the people initially have the power to elect representatives, in whom they trust to make decisions on their behalf, but at the juncture of the public meeting, citizens have the opportunity to continue to push for the consideration of their interests in creating policy and effecting change.

Although there are plenty of opportunities for public participation regarding ideas for projects and voicing general concerns at the start of the NRDA process, some Gulf Coast residents are unsure of their role in the selection of restoration projects, the sort of “next steps” of the process. Though there are guidelines under general NRDA protocol, residents felt that an adaptation was in order to better reflect specific Gulf conditions and to better incorporate specific values.

The Gulf Future Coalition is an organization of ninety-five individuals from forty-six stakeholder groups including state, local and national environmental initiatives, among others. Formed in direct response to the Deepwater Horizon disaster, the Gulf Future Coalition works together to provide “the long-term support needed to protect the environment and the distinct culture of the Gulf Coast for future generations,” as well as working to ensure government

commitment to the economic and environmental well-being of coastal communities (Gulf Restoration Network). The Coalition issued a report entitled “Sunshine on the Gulf: The Case for Transparency in Restoration Project Selection” on November 30, 2011. This report emphasized coastal concerns about project selection and the need for “a systematic project selection methodology that uses these criteria” which “will go farther to ensure a sustainable environmental and community restoration” (Gulf Future Coalition, 2011). The “Sunshine” report demanded that the ecosystem restoration projects that NRDA Trustees choose consider not only superficial fixes to the tainted coastlines, but “address the root cause of the problem” for the “longest term impact for natural resource protection and enhancement.” The report also demanded that the restoration projects chosen engage the public, develop the workforce and support local economies when hiring and contracting, potentially via the creation of localized Citizen Advisory Committees (Gulf Future Coalition, 2011). These types of requests will help to build capacity and add a new component to the Gulf cultural capital, that is, the knowledge that Gulf coast residents specifically know about the intricacies of their society. In this way, Gulf residents have the best chance for change and influencing the direction their community heads.

Reassuringly, in a study of Gulf residents conducted by the Carsey Institute, the responses to the question, “In your opinion, what is the most serious result from this oil spill?” indicated that Gulf residents found the harm to the environment and wildlife as the most serious result from the spill. These results indicate that coastal residents will be more supportive of expanding restoration efforts. It is also important that people are primarily concerned with damage to the environment and wildlife over damage to the oil industry, sentiment that will be useful for organizations looking for support to broaden the economic base and move away from fossil fuel dependency.



**Figure 3. Responses to the question, "In your opinion, what is the most serious result from this spill?"**

Citizen advisory committees formed as part of the NRDA process have proven useful in the past, specifically after oil spills. The Gulf Restoration Network includes on their website a document produced by the Environmental Law Institute that details other oil spill and NRDA-related public committees and the successes they had. After the Exxon Valdez spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska, advisory committees were crucial to ensuring the responsible and effective use of federal funding. Convened on a regular basis by the Department of the Interior, the Public Advisory Committee (PAC) included representatives from various industries, recreational activity interest groups and the general public, among others. This particular PAC served as a voice for communities and connected their needs with those at the federal level in charge of distributing the funds, however, the PAC did not have an official vote on the Council. Instead, the PAC could only offer advice and hope the Council took their opinions seriously. Projects the PAC supported and the Council approved funding for included general habitat restoration and assistance to the clam and mussel populations (Environmental Law Institute, 2011). This document is important because it proves to citizens of the Gulf Coast who may be wary of getting involved, or who may feel that their comments as part of an advisory committee

will not make a difference, that, in fact they will and that their input is warranted and will result in federally-funded, positive change programs in their communities.

Included in the “Sunshine” report are the responses to Gulf Restoration Network and Sierra Club letters regarding NRDA, transparency and public participation concerns. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the Environmental and Natural Resources Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, and state agencies such as the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality, and the Texas Natural Resource Trustees (Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Texas General Land Office) all replied reassuringly to the letters, that they had actively been seeking public input for restoration projects. The letter from the Department of Justice most clearly solicits the letter recipients to provide suggestions for projects and to offer input on proposed projects:

“We encourage you and others in the Non-Governmental Organization community and the public at large to take full advantage of all opportunities that the Trustees provide both to suggest potential early restoration projects and to provide input on projects proposed by the Trustees. If there are particular early restoration projects that...members would like to suggest, please submit them to the federal and state Trustees” (Gulf Future Coalition, 2011).

This type of response also helps to legitimate the democratic power system—the elected officials are acknowledging and actively seeking their constituents’ viewpoints and preferences.

#### *Additional legislative victories for Gulf Coast residents*

As of March 2012, BP settled the class action lawsuit filed against them, agreeing to compensate individuals who filed claims at a sum of at least \$7.8 billion, in addition to the \$8 billion already paid and the \$14 billion already spent on response efforts (Schwartz, 2012). In addition to claims by individuals, BP will also eventually have to pay the United States

government for violations of the Clean Water Act, upwards of \$7.8 billion, and to settle suits filed by state and local governments. Additionally, BP has assumed financial responsibility for medical claims through the year 2033 (Schwartz, 2012).

### **Gulf Restoration Task Force and the Gulf Future Coalition**

While the NRDA process seeks to include the public and offers ample opportunities for comment, other government associations formed in reaction to the Deepwater Horizon spill are less willing to take public comment. On October 5, 2010, President Obama passed an Executive Order forming the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, a group of elected officials charged with appropriating compensational fines BP paid in violation of the Clean Water Act. The four broad goals of the Task Force are to restore and conserve habitat, restore water quality, replenish and protect living coastal and marine resources and to enhance community resilience (Task Force, 2011).

Lisa Jackson, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator, was appointed as the Task Force chair, overseeing representatives from Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. Initially, citizen groups were not represented on the Task Force. Members of fishing associations and non-governmental environmental groups thought it would be most appropriate if they were on the Task Force. This presented an issue of disconnect between every day citizens and the government, as citizens have the greatest knowledge of the area and can best assess community needs, and government, which has the power to create and enforce policies regarding land use and social services.

In protest of their exclusion, organizations, from social justice to faith groups and Riverkeeper associations rallied together and brought the issue to Administrator Jackson. On

May 26, 2011, the EPA posted an announcement in the Federal Register seeking nominations to the Gulf of Mexico Citizen Advisory Committee (GMCAC) and outlining preferred qualities (Car, 2011). In response, sixty-seven organizations involved with the Gulf Future campaign signed an open letter to Administrator Jackson lauding her decision to include 25 citizen representatives but offering advice in order to maximize the effectiveness of the GMCAC. Jackson sought to include five representatives of “citizens and citizen groups” from each state to “provide independent citizen advice...on a broad range of environmental issues affecting the five Gulf of Mexico Coastal States” (Car, 2011). The Gulf Future letter provided more specific criteria to include a wide spectrum of community voices from five general categories: commercial fishing; conservation and environmental activists; socially vulnerable and affected community based organizations; recreational water use, business and tourism; and “at large members” which includes scientists. The signatories also expressed concern over the possibilities of appointees who may have economic incentive either in the oil and gas industry or as contractors involved in wetland restoration (Gulf Future).

As reported in the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force’s Gulf of Mexico Regional Ecosystem Restoration Strategy report, in response to these requests, Administrator Jackson has announced plans to create the 25-member GMCAC to continue the public participation trend through the implementation stage of the restoration process (Gulf Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, 2011). This public announcement is important for the Gulf Future Coalition as well as other activists because their recommendations have been acted upon and thus encourages further public participation.

## **Individual Activism**

Activists participate in social movements for a number of reasons. Under Doug McAdam's cognitive liberation theory, "people will not usually rebel against the status quo...unless they feel that it is unjust or illegitimate (as opposed to natural and inevitable) and that they have the capacity to change it" (McAdam, 2009). Certain injustices were obvious and affected a large part of the population across the Gulf coast as a result of the blowout, while others were less visible but no less threatening to habitat and livelihood. While it takes many activists to form an organization, and many organizations to form a movement, in some cases it only takes one activist to inspire and motivate others to take action.

In certain instances, Gulf Coast community members did not feel that actions as part of organizations such as the Gulf Future Coalition were effective at meeting their needs or the needs of their communities, or that the organizations were not advocating in the right places to make the necessary changes. The American Environmental Movement has always been characterized by an interplay of individual leaders and successful social movement organizations on both the grassroots and political level; the modern fight against dirty energy extraction is no different.

Cherri Foytlin is an activist in Rayne, Louisiana who walked 1,243 miles to Washington, D.C. in April 2011 (Foytlin, 2011). Foytlin's husband worked in the oil industry but was laid off after the explosion. She was motivated to action by the injustices she felt Gulf Coast residents were still suffering a year later—decreased media attention, persistent health problems and lack of promised economic compensation (Foytlin, 2011). Foytlin felt that a good way to rally grassroots support for others facing similar struggles was to walk from Louisiana to the Capital and share her story with the individuals she met along the way. Upon arrival in Washington,

D.C., Foytlin met up with activists attending the Power Shift youth clean energy conference for a rally at BP's headquarters to deliver a symbolic "bill" for almost ten billion dollars in due taxes and cleanup costs (Foytlin, 2011).

Foytlin is not the only one who has walked in order to raise awareness about oil spills. After witnessing an oil tanker collision off the Northern California coast in 1971, John Francis gave up motorized transportation for twenty-two years, during which time he worked to "raise environmental consciousness and to practice public service" (Francis, 2012). For seventeen of the twenty-two years Francis walked around America, he also took a vow of silence, spurred by his frustration from constantly engaging in the argument that one person can, in fact, make a difference in the world. Francis became an expert on oil spills and worked not only to build community among the people he met, connecting them to their environment, but also to redesign policies such as the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (Francis, 2012).

Wilma Subra has been an important figure in the fight for precautionary and reactionary health care in the Gulf. Subra is a chemist, but has provided scientific data to countless communities threatened by energy development and chemical production for several decades (Goldenberg, 2010). As a resident of New Iberia, Louisiana, Subra was an obvious person for the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN) to consult regarding the effects of petrochemicals and dispersants on the health of coastal residents given her experience and expertise. One of Subra's greatest assets is her commitment to educating and empowering individuals to protect their own health, for instance by describing common symptoms from exposure to the chemical compounds common around oil spills (Goldenberg, 2010). Wilma Subra is profiled in the documentary SoLa, which showcases a variety of environmental issues facing Southern Louisiana. From this segment of the film, the viewer learns that even though

Subra's consultation and educational work are helpful services to the community, there are some who see her studies as a direct threat to their work and ways of life. Subra's office was a victim of a drive-by shooting, proving that her work is risky in a hostile environment.

Subra is not the only activist risking her life by working to educate the public and stop dirty energy. One of the most public fights against mountaintop removal of coal mining, a method that has destroyed more than 800 square miles of mountains to date, is Larry Gibson's struggle to protect Kayford Mountain on which his family has lived since the end of the eighteenth century. Gibson's home has been vandalized and he has been a victim of theft on numerous occasions (Keeper of the Mountains Foundation, 2010). Subra and Gibson empower their communities with technical or historical knowledge—a risky task when the community is economically reliant upon the very industry that is causing them harm.

Adjacent to the Cheyenne Reservation in the western United States are parcels of land belonging to the United States Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which have been leased for coal bed methane gas drilling. This method of extraction threatens air and water quality on the reservation, but the most offensive issue portrayed in the documentary *Homeland* was the fact that the drilling wells were being developed without consulting the Cheyenne people (Katahdin). Activist Gail Small started a social and environmental justice group on her reservation called Native Action to stand up against the BLM and this potentially poisonous development. Small's group was successful at preventing the project, proving that a single person can, at the right time and place, rally enough support to run an effective campaign against government and corporate interests.

As the saying goes, there is power in numbers, but sometimes it takes just one person to motivate others to take action and stand up for their right to clean air and clean water.

Individuals such as Small, Subra, Gibson, Foyltlin and Francis are examples of people who make change at both the local and national scale, providing information and inspiration to their communities and setting precedents for land use and industry activity. Moving forward from the Deepwater Horizon disaster, coastal residents can rally behind similar leaders in order to make change, to push for responsible and safe economic development.

### **Federal Actions for Gulf Coast Benefit**

Members of the federal government—representatives in the Senate and the House are pushing the RESTORE Act, a bill that will mandate that 80% of the fines BP will pay (a possible sum of nearly \$18 billion) in violation of the Clean Water Act go directly to Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund, a regional subset of the Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund as the current law states (Alpert, 2012). The RESTORE Act would divide fine money annually among the five coastal states for projects to “restore, protect, and make sustainable use of the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine habitats, and coastal wetlands” (EDF, 2011).

The provisions for Gulf states requested in the RESTORE Act have long been advocated for by a variety of local and national citizen groups, including the Audubon society, which encouraged Audubon chapters across the country to build grassroots support for the measure by means of letters to the editor and newsletter briefings since the bill’s introduction in the spring of 2011 (National Audubon Society, Inc., 2012). This direct track to the Gulf Coast for fines is important because otherwise there is the potential for the BP fine money to be applied to projects elsewhere than the region affected most.

## **Discussion**

In the wake of the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, the general public pressured government to pass laws that held corporate polluters accountable for their actions, and to better regulate industries that could be potentially harmful to environmental and human health. The situation presented issues beyond just oiled coastlines, because the public and the government did not have response procedures in place and thus public input on government was somewhat limited to traditional methods of protest including petitions and letters to the editor. In this instance, the public expected government to address the issues related to the spill, to enact legislation to better handle a similar situation in the future. Public involvement was focused around pressuring government to be leaders in the response and prevention arenas.

Forty years later after the Deepwater Horizon incident, infrastructure for public input in government decisions already existed. Because a government response protocol was already in place under such legislation as the Oil Pollution Act and Clean Water Act, public participation efforts were instead focused on ensuring the greatest amount of resources were sent directly to the Gulf coast and that the policies were followed as closely as possible. Coastal residents worked with government and took full advantage of participation opportunities to make sure that BP fine money arrived directly in the Gulf region as opposed to in a general fund in Washington, DC where the money could potentially end up anywhere across the States. Activist network successes, including pressuring Administrator Jackson for the creation of the Gulf of Mexico Citizen Advisory Committee and encouraging coastal residents to attend public meetings and issue comments, were important ways to demonstrate the amplified power of people and government working together for a more sustainably-based future. This type of partnership was only one way that the public exercised power, as individuals such as Wilma Subra and Cheri

Foytlin connected with their immediate communities, and the community at large, to educate and motivate at the most basic, peer-to-peer level.

The Carsey Institute survey indicated concern for the environment and wildlife in the immediate months after the Deepwater Horizon incident. Public participation in meetings was continuous and noticeable. As cleanup efforts subsided and settlements were made, it would seem that perhaps the most visible and hard-hitting effects of the spill might slowly sink into the backdrop and that the fervor for participation may subside. On the contrary, two-year anniversary events in April 2012 ran the gamut from green business expositions to town hall discussions on the current state of the Gulf featuring oil spill experts such as Riki Ott and grassroots organizers such as Foytlin and Aaron Viles of the Gulf Restoration Network (Gulf Restoration Network). Such events show that there are still concerned citizens still dealing with and willing to address the issues that resulted from the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

## **Conclusion**

No social movement happens in a vacuum. In attempts to influence and fundamentally change policy regarding coastal restoration and offshore drilling among other topics, citizen groups and local governments have also called attention to the way their surrounding communities think about fossil fuel usage and ways to expand the economy without oil rigs. From GOO! chapters in 1969 to Gail Small's Native Action group in present times, everyday people have made it their priority to stand up for their beliefs and challenge corporate interests on behalf of public health and the preservation of natural resources. These actions are proof of small victories that add up, and an inspiration for present and future generations to continue to

shift cultural values away from globalization, capitalism and consumerism for a more sustainable, just and stable, clean energy future.

Perhaps what is needed, instead of better and safer technology to continue to enable the dependence on fossil fuels, is a shift in values and cultural norms to move beyond fossil fuels. Emissions-free methods of producing electricity such as wind and solar would be alternatives to risky and energy-intensive deepwater drilling and mountain top removal mining of coal. Through persistent community action and increased cooperation between individuals, governments and corporations in consideration of the future, we can have a more sustainably based society. Because of the close connections between environment, economy and culture, it is important to consider the effects of an activity in one realm on the other two. In the context of this study, it is important that elected officials with political power recognize and act upon the economic and environmental needs and wants of those they represent in not just the short-term but also the long-term. Communities recuperating from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill could prove to be leading models in their efforts to restore ecosystems and adapt their ways of life.

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