

Loons and the Gulf Oil Spill

By Ross Powers

The loss of a few loons in the disastrous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is insignificant when compared to other losses. I feel helpless to do anything about the loons or the major disaster taking place, as I watch TV and shutter at the oil soaked birds. It makes me angry.

The Gulf of Mexico oil spill is huge and growing. It is immediately devastating to the economy and ecology of the area and will impact the rest of us eventually. A way of life and a whole ecosystem is at stake. With our economy already stressed, losing the fisheries and tourist trade in the gulf, will hurt everyone. We are interconnected, like the web of life, and the union of states. That is why this is everyone's problem. I feel sorry for the people that are struggling with this monstrous oil spill, because it is the worst kind of oil and in the worst location. Surrounded by nature preserves and pristine white sand beaches, there is little chance that it will be carried out to sea with the currents. Wind and waves will transport the floating oil around the Gulf driving it into critical shallows and beaches. The critical near shore areas must be protected. The responding parties know this and are working hard to prevent more damage than what is already done. They need to pray for calm weather with no hurricanes this season.

The Gulf of Mexico, like the Great Lakes basin is a unique eco-system. It is home and hatchery for everything from shrimp to pelicans. It is a stop-over and resting area for many migratory birds. Some of Michigan's juvenile loons are there now. They will stay for a few years before returning north to nest as adults. The future breeding stock of our loons is congregating in near shore areas where the fish and crabs are easy to reach. That is where the wind will be depositing the smothering crude oil. The adult loons are safe in Michigan until fall, when they, as well as this season's young, will either be lucky and choose to overwinter on the Atlantic or unlucky and choose the Gulf.

Crude oil is a killer loaded with all kinds of solvents and "light ends" that taint fish and invertebrates with a taste and odor that will last their whole life. What is not smothered, spoiled or tainted by the crude will be unfit for consumption. Contact with the sticky tar-like oil is usually fatal to waterfowl and waterbirds with only 50% of the rescued and cleaned wildlife surviving. Most critters will die unnoticed in the goo and never be rescued or counted. Plants, oysters, and crabs are not able to flee and are sure to be killed. Ocean waves act as giant mixers to force tainting solvents into the water and leave behind thick globs of foamy oil on the beaches. The surfacing heavy crude oil has a lot of pollutants to deliver to the air and water before it plops on shore. The high pressure undersea fountain that is injecting gas and oil droplets into the water at the bottom of the ocean will pollute a mile of water as it rises to the surface. The polluted water can become trapped in thermal layers and transported by undersea currents to impact large areas of the ocean. Dispersants are not needed. Natural bio-degradation will

eventually handle the diluted petroleum, IF the thick masses of oil are removed. It remains to be seen what damage this pollution event will cause to the ecology of the Gulf. A lot will depend on the weather, with wind having a major influence.

Remember the Boy Scout motto “Be Prepared”? They were not. As a retired environmentalist, I worked on many oil spills and know that you can’t prevent them, but you can prepare for them. Responsible oil companies have spill prevention plans that include contingencies for worst case scenarios. Immediate response with proper equipment is required to contain and clean up an oil spill. It is obvious that in this case, regulators let them avoid keeping these resources ready and available. It makes me angry. This tragedy affects us all.

MLPA is the only organization that is tracking the population fluctuations of the Common Loon in Michigan. That is why it is important to continue these population counts. I feel sorry for all the Loon Rangers that worried over young chicks all these years, only to realize that they are in danger in the Gulf. When the next generation of Michigan loons migrates out of our area of influence, we must trust that Nature will prevail over the folly of man. We can only hope for the best and count the returning pairs in the spring. Yes, we could use your help. To volunteer to help protect Michigan’s loons and to assess the damage to our loon population during this crisis, contact: Michigan Loonwatch, P.O. Box 294, Shepherd MI 48883, michiganloons@yahoo.com