Oil-Soaked Birds Saved: HSUS Participates in Historic Bird Rescue

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/cu_reps

Part of the Animal Studies Commons, Environmental Studies Commons, and the Terrestrial and Aquatic Ecology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/cu_reps/24
Washington, D.C.—As the world watched the black tide of crude oil from the Amoco Cadiz devastate bird life along the French coast, HSUS staffer Guy Hodge was reporting to Congress about efforts to save oil-soaked birds in a recent Chesapeake Bay oil spill. A barge (ATC-133) carrying nearly 500,000 gallons of crude had run aground south of the Maryland-Virginia border. Some of its cargo spilled into this North American waterfowl wintering area.

"I remained at the spill site for a period of nine days. Following my initial tour of duty, I twice returned to the bird care facility to provide technical assistance to the volunteer work force. In total, HSUS staff members contributed more than 183 man-hours to the ATC-133 bird rescue operation."

Together with HSUS cruelty investigator Phil Steward, Hodge had assisted in the most successful on-site bird rescue operation in history. One out of every three rescued birds was saved. Testifying before the same committee Lynn Greenwalt, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service said, "I think the release or survival rate of 32% is extraordinary in this set of circumstances."

"In this Set of Circumstances . . ."

The dry congressional testimony hardly begins to tell the story. The last gasp of winter had brought high winds and snow to the Chesapeake Bay. The Allied Towing Company barge was pounded by wind and water until its stern end sank and the number 6 crude began to spill from an uncapped hatch. Containment booms were placed around the barge in the hope the oil could be held back.

But the spreading oil found an ally in the winds, and Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) personnel soon began to see the deadly results. Ten thousand to 15,000 birds were affected by the spill. Oil-soaked birds were
stroking to stay afloat. The bodies of vice began its bird rescue operations. The was put into gear.

...involving the cooperative efforts of The HSUS. "The welfare of the birds," said Hodge. "... elected to be in his testimony. "In the past, there has been virtually no coordination of bird rescue operations by either state or Federal Wildlife agencies. Differences regarding treatment procedure, long hours, frustra-
ation, and an absence of communication led to dissatisfaction and bitter quarrels with the volunteer work force. Volunteer and pro-

minister bird rescue facilities without the critical support of Federal or state wildlife agencies."  

Round the Clock Rescue

Hodge and Steward arrived at the spill site late on a Thursday evening. They relieved two FWS personnel and worked through the night providing emergency treatment to the birds and organized the bird receiving center. After napping in chairs, they started out the following morn-
ing and worked the entire day continuing emergency first aid. They force fed fluids to the birds and removed oil from around their mouths and nostrils. They also created an individual medical record for each bird.

After the birds' conditions were stabil-
ed, they were moved to a second facility. This was followed up by the cleaning and drying process which consisted of washing in detergents, rinsing, and drying with blowers. Then the birds were confined in pens and observed for signs of ill health and stress. Following a period of rest, the birds were fed. They were also given several days of therapeutic swimming to re-establish their natural waterproofing. When the birds had regained their strength; they were banded and released in an area unaffected by the spill.

The whole process of capturing, caring for, cleaning, drying, feeding, swimming, and releasing has been carefully detailed in a new booklet prepared by the Interna-
tional Bird Rescue Research Center (IBRRC) of Berkeley, California, with the guidance and assistance of various experts including The HSUS. The booklet, "Serving Oiled Birds," is published and distributed by the American Petroleum Institute.

In order to assess the entire situation, Hodge joined Coast Guardsmen in small boats searching the Bay for stricken birds. "It was a chilling and rather daring adven-
ture," said Hodge. "Several times we had to leap into choppy water to capture frightened birds who could not know we were trying to help them."

Meanwhile, Steward continued the initial treatment procedure for the hundreds of victims who were lucky enough to be found. Steward commented on the volunteers. "I have been involved in oil spills, floods, and other animal-related disasters," he said. "But this disaster had a very heartwarming side to it. Most of our volunteers were senior citizens. They work-
ed arm in arm with us in the bird care facilities through the bitter cold and the dir-
ty work. Their first concern was the birds."

In addition to the HSUS, The Interna-
tional Bird Rescue Research Center sent their executive director, who coordinated the actual cleaning process. Hodge's train-
ing was taken at The IBRRC and thus there was agreement on all aspects of the relief effort.

More than 400 birds were eventually brought into the rescue center for treat-
ment. Of that number, 140 were rehabilitated. Supplies were made readily available by the Coast Guard who also built the drying pens where the birds were placed until they were deemed ready to return to the wild. By comparison, less than two dozen birds were released by rescuers following a similar spill in February 1976 which also took place in Chesapeake Bay.

HSUS Severs as Teacher, Too

"In cooperation with the Humane Socie-
ty of the United States, the International Bird Rescue Research Center, and com-
munity animal welfare agencies, both the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Coast Guard have contributed their talents to a series of workshops for volunteer laborers," Hodge testified. These workshops are helping local animal welfare groups standardize their approaches to res-
cuing oil-soaked birds and thus increasing the survival rate for the unfortunate creatures who are the victims of circum-
cumstance.

The standardized methods, the clearly delineated chain of command, and the availability of materials made the response to ATC-133 highly successful. The total ac-
cord of all professionals, although seeming-
ly fundamental to the bird rescue opera-
tions, was a radical departure from other oil spills in which The HSUS has been in-

olved.

Of course, everything did not go ab-
solutely according to plan. There were mix-
ups, lost supplies, and mistakes in judg-
ment. However, the high survival rate testifies to the positive effect of preplann-
ing. Previous oil spill disasters have had survival rates of less than one percent. With improved planning Hodge expects future spill release rates to reach 2 out of 3 birds.

"As the world's unfailing thirst for oil increases, the chances of more wildlife be-
threatened by tanker and barge ac-
cidents increases," said HSUS President John A. Hoyt. "That is why we have selected certain personnel for training and why we have participated in the training workshops for local societies. Even though the cruelty is unintentional, the suffering remains."

As HSUS's Oil Spill Response Coor-
dinator, Hodge is following up the ATC-
133 experience with a detailed critique to the Fish and Wildlife Service in addition to his congressional testimony. "We must remember," said Hodge "...no organized system for saving waterfowl existed before. In a real sense, the American public didn't realize this. Media coverage of spills has been good and the individual efforts of some local groups was often portrayed as a large government-sponsored effort."

Hodge went on: "The TV viewing public began to believe there was a major force of volunteers and government workers waiting in the wings to respond immediately to such disasters. The ATC-133 incident was the very first test of a plan that has been several years in the making."

The HSUS was a major force in the development and implementation of that plan. The International Bird Rescue Research Center developed the techniques for the rehabilitation of contaminated birds. Without the combined efforts of these two groups, "...we wouldn't have gotten off square one," said Hodge.
Groups such as The New Jersey Branch of The HSUS have availed themselves of the training and have organized state-wide networks of local animal welfare groups. If a spill happens in The Garden State, New Jersey HSUS has made it possible to quickly assemble a large group of well-trained people to begin rescue efforts immediately.

**HSUS Not a "Johnny Come Lately"**

The direct involvement of The HSUS with the rehabilitation of oil-contaminated birds extends over the past seven years. HSUS personnel have served as consultants to bird rescuers and provided on-site supervision of rescue efforts for more than two dozen spills.

This kind of involvement in any program is expensive. Occasionally the cost for bird rehabilitation efforts is borne by the Federal Oil Spill Revolving Fund. However, the expenses of humane organizations are not always retrieved because they are included in billings to the liable party and they are often tied in with any legal actions taken against the company which caused the spill.

Sponsoring workshops, training staff and volunteers, advising government agencies, testifying as expert witnesses, and travel costs all add up to a hefty commitment on the part of The HSUS.

**You Can Help**

Your assistance in this vital part of HSUS programming is essential. Your contributions will enable The HSUS to take planned manuals off the back burner and get them published and distributed. We have already distributed free of charge copies of "Saving Oiled Seabirds" to local animal welfare groups in coastal communities throughout the country.

Your assistance will help us train additional staff members. Your gifts will improve our ability to respond to spills no matter where they occur. We have a need to purchase certain supplies and equipment, conduct research into capture and rehabilitation techniques, and sponsor additional workshops for animal welfare groups located near bodies of water where spills may occur.

Use the enclosed envelope to aid HSUS efforts to help the victims of circumstance. Send us a contribution today so we can continue to help the animals.