

'We felt so helpless'

Thousands of Birds Die in Chesapeake Bay Oil Spill



Photo by Keith Hay

"We felt so helpless. Oil-covered birds were being brought in by the boxful. All we could do was attempt to clean and dry them, then watch most of them go into convulsions and die." Guy R. Hodge, HSUS director of research and data services, made these comments last February after returning from the scene of the worst oil spill in Chesapeake Bay history. He and HSUS investigator Philip Steward were among scores of people trying to save the lives of thousands of waterfowl that became mired in tar-like crude oil after a barge sank in the bay during a severe wind storm.

The barge, owned by Steuart Petroleum Co., leaked 250,000 gallons of industrial oil into the bay, blackening 90 miles of shoreline near the mouth of the Potomac River in southern Virginia. An estimated 20,000 wintering water birds suffered a slow and agonizing death after being covered with the oil that hardened like asphalt on their feathers.

The spill occurred at the worst possible time because the population of migratory ducks that make their winter homes in the marshes of the bay was at its peak. Among the more than 12 species of birds affected were the American coot, horned grebe, loon, canvasback duck, and the rare whistling swan.

The U. S. Coast Guard officially designated the disaster as a "major spill" and privately employed workers to clean up the oil. Detergent was spread over bay waters, and oil-soaked sand was shovelled into barrels and dump trucks. Warning devices were placed along the shoreline in the hope of scaring the birds from their nests.

As the birds flew into the bay, oil and icy water washed over them destroying the natural waterproofing and insulating properties of their feathers. No longer able to shed water or search for food, they became cold, hungry, and exhausted as they struggled to remain afloat. In addition, most of the birds ingested oil while attempting to preen their feathers.

When the helpless birds washed onto bay beaches, disorganized volun-

teers and shoreside residents who knew little about how to capture or clean the birds began trying to help them. HSUS immediately issued a press release to the local news media providing instructions on recovery techniques and home cleaning of the birds, as well as urging volunteers to transport the birds to several local animal shelters equipped to give them special care.

Hodge and Steward met with local government officials and obtained the use of an abandoned Army building, which was transformed into a waterfowl rescue center in coordination with local shelters and private homes. HSUS called David Smith of the International Bird Rescue Research Center in Berkeley, Calif., to the rescue center for technical assistance in the cleaning of the birds. In addition, HSUS obtained food and equipment to care for the birds.

Volunteers in each of the rescue centers worked 12- to 14-hour days for a week, washing the birds and feeding them with a mush made from cornmeal and bits of minnows. However, they had limited success, with fewer than 5 out of 100 birds surviving the oily ordeal.

"It was terribly frustrating," said Steward. "We were trying so hard to keep them alive, but we lost almost every one that came in." Hodge said that it became more and more difficult to return each morning to the rescue center because most of the birds that he had cleaned had died during the night. But despite the apparent futility in cleaning the birds, a strong band of camaraderie developed among the volunteers in their determination to make amends for what man had done to the birds. One volunteer said, "I feel an obligation to help these birds. Some people have an obligation to make oil, and others have an obligation to clean up their mess."

In an effort to review the waterfowl rescue operation, HSUS and the American Petroleum Institute jointly convened a meeting on Feb. 21 with representatives from state and federal wildlife agencies and several private wildlife conservation groups. The participants concluded that state and federal wildlife management officials failed to implement a pollution contingency plan for

the bay that could have reduced casualties among the birds. The tri-state plan, which gives the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state game departments bordering the bay responsibility for decisions affecting wildlife, was largely ignored during the disaster. Inaccessibility of beaches, an inadequate number of volunteers, and lack of equipment and supplies were also factors limiting success of the rescue effort.

As so often happens after a major disaster, others follow in its wake. On March 7 an Amtrak Auto-Train derailed and plunged into Quantico Creek in

northern Virginia spilling nearly 1,000 gallons of diesel fuel into the water. The accident occurred near the Mason Neck Wildlife Refuge, where many water birds were feeding. After learning of the spill, Hodge and Refuge Manager Dick Antonette set up a bird rescue plan that subsequently ended without loss of wildlife. "I think the response to this spill demonstrates what can be accomplished when we receive the cooperation of the Fish and Wildlife Service and provide staff who have the expertise to develop a proper waterfowl rescue plan," Hodge said.



Photo by Jim Walker



Photo by Curtis Badger

HSUS Fights to Keep Turtles Out of Soup



HSUS Staff Photo

Economic interests working through the U. S. Dept. of Commerce are seeking to block a Dept. of Interior proposal to put sea turtles on the endangered species list in order to continue exploiting them for their meat and hides.

HSUS has joined other animal welfare and conservation organizations in supporting Interior's plan to declare the loggerhead, Pacific ridley, and green sea turtles endangered and, thereby, protect them from all types of commercial exploitation, including the incidental taking of sea turtles by shrimp fishermen.

While Interior has authority to determine what species will be listed as endangered, responsibility for all sea life is shared jointly by Interior and Commerce.

One of the economic interests that stands to lose money if sea turtles are protected is Mariculture, Ltd., which collects thousands of sea turtle eggs annually from the beaches of Dutch Surinam and hatches them at its turtle farm on the British Island of Grand Cayman. With export of turtle meat as its objective, Mariculture claims it will have enough turtles reproducing in captivity by 1980 to replace the need to take turtles out of the wild. Many zoologists consider this projection unrealistic.

HSUS wildlife expert Sue Pressman, representing Monitor, a consortium of

animal welfare and conservation organizations, inspected the Grand Cayman turtle farm in March to gather information on the operation. She concluded that Mariculture has not yet succeeded in getting a substantial number of turtles to reproduce and, consequently, agrees that the 1980 projection is unrealistically optimistic.

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Because sea turtles must be approximately 11 years old before they can reproduce, it is a long process to establish enough breeding pairs in captivity to replace the need for taking eggs out of the wild.

“It's not like this operation was necessary to provide protein to the starving people of the world,” Mrs. Pressman said. “Turtle meat is a delicacy that very few people indulge in. Why should the worldwide population of any species be jeopardized solely for the taste and profits of a few people?”

HSUS is also concerned that the success of Mariculture's operation could

make turtle meat popular and, therefore, a highly prized target for poachers. “Nothing can spell the end for an animal faster than to have it become the source of black market operation,” Mrs. Pressman said.

F. Wayne King, Ph.D., director of zoology and conservation for the New York Zoological Society, on behalf of Monitor, urged the federal government at a March hearing to keep sea turtles on the endangered list. King expressed fear that the Mariculture operation, coupled with other consumer uses of sea turtle products and the incidental taking of sea turtles by shrimp fishermen, would seriously threaten the worldwide sea turtle population. He also urged that sole responsibility for the status of sea turtles be given the Dept. of the Interior, instead of being shared jointly by Interior and the Dept. of Commerce as it is now.

In a statement before the same hearing, Dr. Archie Carr, zoology professor at the University of Florida and one of the leading authorities on sea turtles, expressed fear that vested commercial interests are threatening the future of the turtles in question. “For our government to drag its feet in the effort to save them or to accede to action that leaves loopholes for further exploitation of any kind whatever would be anachronistic and shameful,” he said.