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May 28, 2010

A Many-Sourced Map of the Gulf Oil Spill

By Mary Helen Miller

The effects of the BP oil spill on the Gulf of Mexico shoreline are being documented as no disaster has been before. And the documentarians are not just researchers and the news media, but many other people as well.

"If you took tens of thousands of pictures, especially if you took them all at once, you would have an extraordinary view of the oil spill in a way that's never existed," said Eric Frost, director of the Visualization Center at San Diego State University.

The center, along with Crisis Commons, an online community that uses technology to respond to disasters, is using aerial images of the Gulf of Mexico coastline, as well as photographs people are taking on the ground, to create a comprehensive and detailed map of the damage. San Diego State University has paid for a plane to periodically capture images from the sky to form base maps. In the next step, using a free smartphone application called Oil Reporter, people can take photos of the coastline. The photos end up at the Visualization Center with a time stamp and a GPS location attached. The visualization center places the smartphone images on the base maps. The maps are scheduled to be visible to the public on the Web sites [Gulf Coast Spill Coalition](#) and [Oil Reporter](#).

Mr. Frost says that people seeking remedies for the disaster can use the maps to figure out where to use oil-containment booms and to see where oil made it through booms.

Richard A. Snyder, a biology professor and director of the Center for Environmental Diagnostic and Bioremediation at the University of West Florida, is one of the scientists tracking the spill. He said this map could be valuable, particularly in its combination of ground and aerial images. However, he wondered whether the project could be sustained for the long period that the oil will be in the area.

"It's a great idea. The problem is setting it up so that is repeatable at a reasonable cost," he says. "You can spend a lot of money and establish a base line, but if nobody can go back and follow up and see how things have changed, then it's not that useful."

Mr. Frost says a groundswell of involvement could help to sustain the effort. "It helps the people that are actually trying to respond, which is pretty much every single community in the region," he says.

As for tracking changes, some of the aerial images show the beaches in infrared, which can highlight changes in vegetation. (Infrared wavelengths illuminate the cell walls of plants.) Since the first round of images was captured before oil reached land, they're useful for before-and-after comparisons.

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