

# Oil spills... in ten exclamations

## Not on our shores!

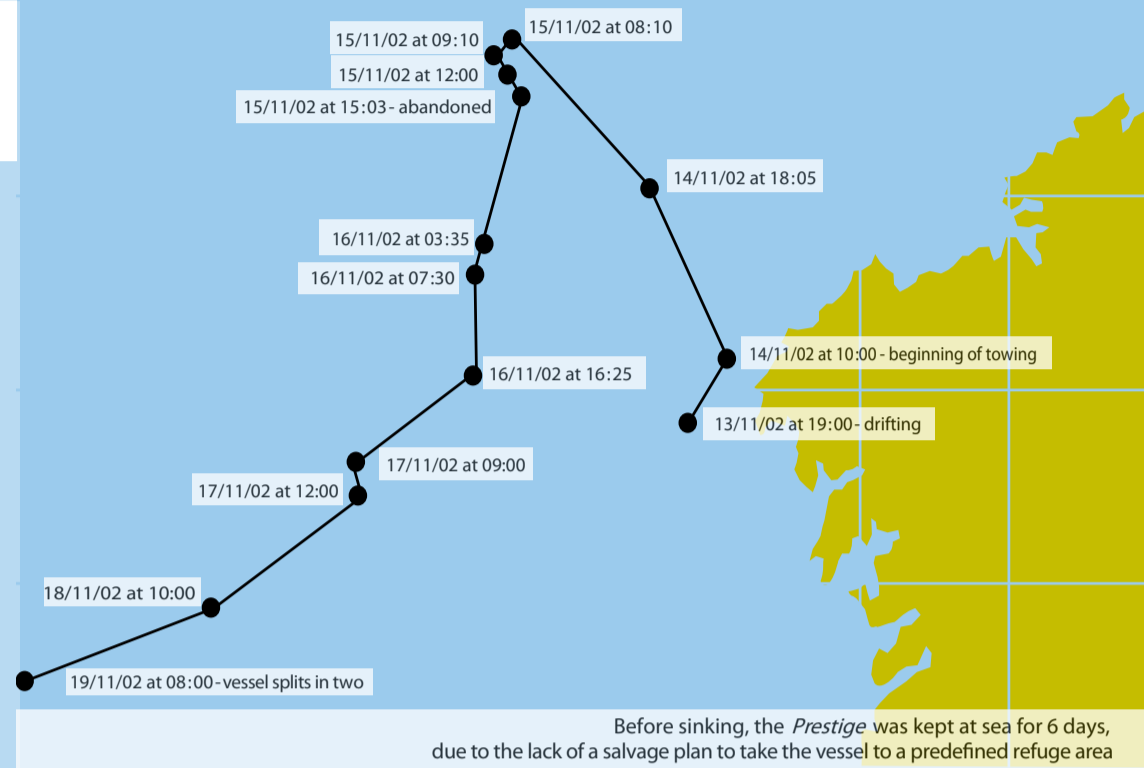


The Abelle Bourbon © Marine nationale

The master of a vessel in difficulty will naturally request refuge from the coastal State. After the *Prestige* was denied refuge, Europe requested that all member States designate refuge areas where vessels in difficulty can be received. But who would possibly accept putting their local environment and their economy at risk by offering shelter to a disabled vessel vomiting pollutant?

In the event of a disaster, insurance only covers a small part of the damages and it often takes several years of out-of-court negotiations, or in some cases over a decade of legal proceedings, to eventually obtain only partial compensation.

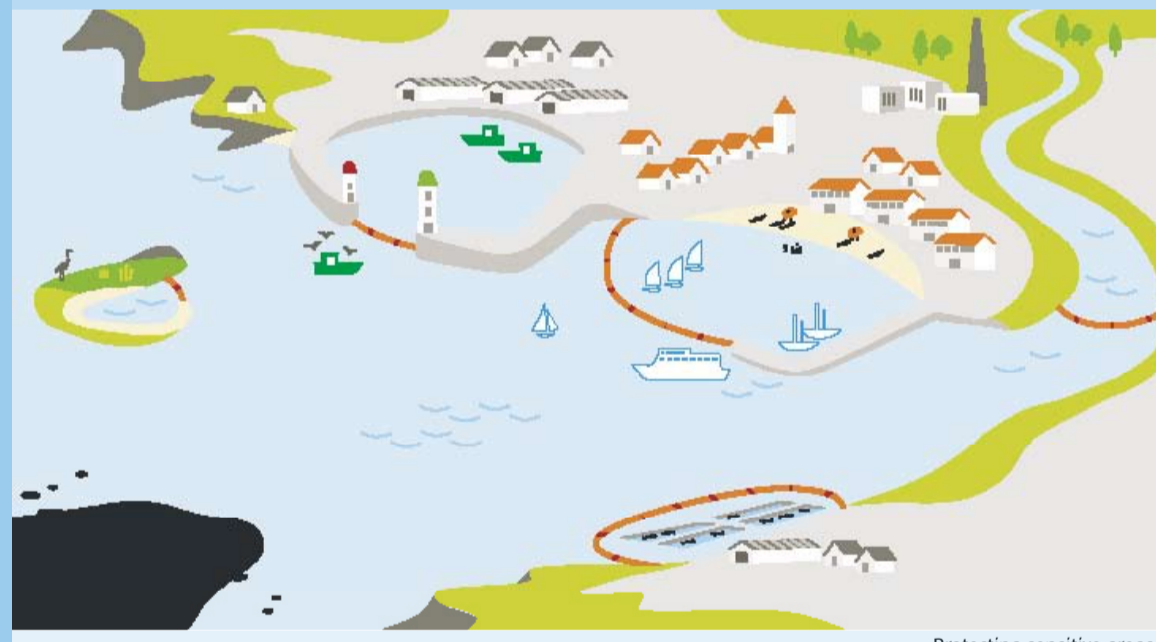
As long as accepting a vessel in a refuge area does not lead to an automatic guarantee of rapid and complete compensation in the event of a disaster, the "Not on our shores!" attitude is highly likely to continue to prevail.



## Our beaches polluted again!

Recovery of heavy petroleum products at sea by specialised oil spill response vessels and fishing boats made a lot of progress with the experience of the *Erika* and the *Prestige* spills. Dispersants for use on light hydrocarbons have become far less harmful for the environment. Slick drift prediction models and remote sensing techniques help to adjust predictions of arrivals of pollutant on a daily basis, therefore increasing their reliability. Response plans define areas where floating booms could be deployed to protect economically or ecologically sensitive areas prior to an incident.

However, coasts bordering deep waters cannot be protected. Large estuaries and open bays can only be partially preserved. Rapidly changing winter weather conditions can undermine even the most reliable weather forecasts. A large part of the pollutant spill will therefore undoubtedly have to be removed from the shoreline.



Protecting sensitive areas

## An economic disaster!

In the area affected, the economic consequences of an oil spill bear heavily on activities which rely on the sea. Fishing, aquaculture, tourism and all activities related to the sea can be affected for several months or even years. The international compensation system in force, already revised several times to increase available funds, still retains the principle of a compensation limit per accident. Processing claims is time-consuming. Claimants are only compensated after several years, and even then they rarely receive full compensation. The costs incurred to re-establish their clientele most often remain at their expense. For them it is indeed a disaster.

Often today, the State, through financial aid, tax exemption and bridging loans and the region, through campaigns to restore its image, help to lighten the load of those affected by the spill.



Impact on tourism, polluted beach © Cedre

## A catastrophe for seabirds!

Because seabirds sit on the water surface and dive to find food, they tend to be the most immediate victims of oil spills. They are also the most obvious and emblematic: images of oiled birds are widely broadcast by the media.

In most cases, very few birds survive the stress accumulated by their oiling, capture, transportation and clean-up by inexperienced hands, in a makeshift rescue centre, with unsuitable detergents. However, progress has been made. An oiled bird rescue plan and a treatment guide were produced after the *Erika* spill. A mobile treatment and rehabilitation centre was also established. Specialised teams, with appropriate materials and products are now able to save a quarter or even half of the oiled birds which are collected in time.



Oiled seabird © Vincent Munier - LPO

## Nothing has changed!

In reality, many things have changed. Prevention has progressed. Response at sea is now efficient. Response on land and in inshore waters is now well planned and largely mechanised. International cooperation has become systematic. New response tools, products and techniques are regularly added to the existing array.

However, in the case of a large-scale arrival of pollutant on the shoreline, it will always take a few days to supply all the necessary means to every site. The shortfalls will rapidly be highlighted by the media, giving an impression of unpreparedness. Furthermore, pairs of hands, buckets and shovels will always remain indispensable tools for certain clean-up operations.



Recovery on land

## Operational discharge is worse than accidental spillage!

Oil tanker accidents account for 6% of the oil released every year into the marine environment. This volume is noticeably similar to that of operational discharge from these same tankers. But, it is less than operational discharge and spills caused by non-tankers, which represent around 20% of annual release of oil.

An accident will cause a local, large-scale arrival of pollutant, whereas operational discharge scatters pollution all along the major maritime navigation routes. Which is worst in the long term? We have no answer today. There have currently been no scientific studies on the impact of operational discharge, even in the most badly affected areas.

## Never again!

Every major oil spill triggers this same legitimate demand from those affected. New preventative measures are often announced: accelerated elimination of the most dangerous vessels, tighter controls, new navigation regulations in areas of dense traffic, high sea tugs on standby in dangerous straits...

Each measure will only protect against one type of accident and its implementation will take time. Funds must be made available and international agreements amended. During this time, new risks appear. Economic pressure pushes for more automation and fewer men onboard. "Never again like that!" is a realistic aim. "No more oil spills!" is sadly a deceptive illusion.



## The affected area will never recover!

A reference work produced through an initiative of the French Ministry of Ecology as an upshot of the *Erika* pollution and entitled "Marsées noires et environnement" established that no oil spill had caused either the disappearance of a known species or an irreversible imbalance in flora or fauna. They all however triggered high local mortality rates in sensitive organisms, sometimes added to by the further destructive effects of excessive clean-up operations going against environmentally friendly practices.

Many factors indicate that some oil spills may have induced carcinogenic, teratogenic or mutagenic effects on oiled organisms or subsequent generations. Such effects have been reproduced in laboratory-based experiments. However, the reality of these effects in natural conditions, independently of the effects of chronic pollution, has not yet been demonstrated.



Return to normal © Cedre

## Flags of convenience = rust buckets!

International maritime law is based on the principle of freedom. The open registration policy in force gives shipowners the right to register a vessel navigating in international waters under the flag of any country which complies with the rules established by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), without having to live or have possessions in the country. Eliminating open registration is not part of IMO's agenda: statistics show that fleets flying flags often labelled "flags of convenience" do not all have particularly high accident rates. Furthermore, not all rust buckets fly flags of convenience.

To protect themselves from substandard vessels, the European countries have implemented a coordinated defence policy through the exchange of black lists of vessels reported as substandard during port State control. The vessels in question are banned from European ports until the deficiencies are repaired.

