

“Oil tanker runs aground”



While driving to work at 7am on 28 February 2008 the news headlines on “Da Mornin Boil” radio show was that the 45,000 ton tanker ‘FICUS’, carrying over 120,000 barrels of oil, had grounded on a reef half a mile off shore from the Clifton Park conservation area some 12 miles from Nassau. Our immediate thought was that it was the beginning of the bird breeding season, evident through the 30 or so Royal Terns which had just arrived in that location.

An immediate meeting with the shelter director and manager resulted in an allocation of tasks and we were in crisis management mode. Our immediate questions were:

Is the ship leaking? - What type of oil? - What is the weather forecast? - Who can help?
What were the likely consequences? - Where do we tap onto for expertise? - Who will pay?

Within the first day we had established the Royal Bahamas Defence Force and US Coast Guards were on stand by, Shell International had a response team flying over from London and the Harbour Master was aware of our willingness to help affected wildlife. We contacted the RSPCA in the UK, IFAW at Cape Cod and WSPA in Costa Rica and all stepped up to the plate on stand by. We visited the site and interviewed anyone who had any knowledge of the situation. Customs confirmed a mixed cargo of light oils, gasoline and diesel was on board. The sales marketing manager of the receiving company, Sun Oil, confirmed there was no breach of the double hull and that the Shell response crew had arrived.

We contacted the Bahamas Air Sea Rescue and private boat owners and phone numbers were exchanged. We established that specific local residents would keep us informed of changes. We ensured our barn was cleared and that 12 kennel units were dedicated to birds if needed. We are fortunate in that we have veterinarians of our staff otherwise we would have had vets on standby too.

We also ensured there would be a supply of fish to feed a large number of birds if needed.

On day two we met the Shell communications officer on site and exchanged contact details. She introduced us to a representative of the International Tanker Owners Pollution Federation Ltd (ITOPF) who provided us with their oil-spill control booklet which contains very useful information. That same day I received the latest RSPCA oiled bird protocols and was on stand by to train staff and volunteers to receive oiled birds. I met the Shell Ecology & Emergency Response team leader and took him to our shelter facility and we discussed how we could adapt kennels with tarpaulin screens and outbuildings for quiet areas and we agreed how we could set up three cleaning stations. He used our Internet access to confirm supplies such as collapsible pools, protective clothing, catch nets & detergent could be shipped in from the US in less than a day and they would pay. We agreed we would use their services and notified the RSPCA, IFAW and WSPA of progress.

We agreed birds caught at sea have a better chance of survival than beached birds. Hot and cold water supply was essential, preferably not chlorinated, but we had both mains and well water. We made our main office available as an operations room with phone and Internet access. We had sufficient bathrooms and building space on site for a team of 40 plus helpers if required. We were prepared to use our three vehicles and showed we had suitable carrying receptacles for birds. We also provided a list of all the bird species, and approximate numbers, in the vicinity and liaised with the conservation and ornithological groups locally. We also confirmed all cell phones were working.

Every subsequent day we visited the site at least twice and got updated reports. We kept all press cuttings and we monitored TV and radio news reports, as these provided some information which we would have, otherwise, missed. We provided our own press release to show the community we were prepared to help if it all went badly wrong.

We monitored weather forecasts and we did encounter two blustery nights with an on shore wind about force 4, gusting force 5. The local meteorological office was more reliable than some TV broadcasts. The strategy was to offload much of the oil onto a barge sent over from Florida and this took several days but eventually the lighter load and high tide allowed the ship to be pulled into the deep channel nearby.

A week later the ship was moored by the oil terminal only half a mile from where it grounded. Final reports stated damage was slight and there was no breach. Subsequent newspaper reports stated there was no pilot on board and this is being investigated. A Google search showed this same ship had hit a terminal quay in Jamaica some years ago causing considerable damage.

The final outcome and lessons learned: There was no oil spill but there was damage to an important ecosystem on the reef. If there had been a spill we believe we were as prepared as we could be. The key was communications. Speaking to everyone involved was essential. Being supportive of Shell's efforts was much more productive than being critical of them. Tapping in to their emergency response resources would have provided instant expertise and equipment at no cost to us. Immediately approaching affiliated societies like the RSPCA, IFAW and WSPA helped establish what resources we might call upon had Shell not responded so well. We did not assume there was anyone else to help with contaminated birds on our island and we were right. Had this have been a worse case scenario everyone would have been looking at us to deal with it.

Advice: Appraise your resources before the disaster happens. Act as though a disaster IS going to happen. Have meetings with staff and volunteers to discuss contingency plans. We always think we are up to speed in readiness for hurricanes but we had done no planning for an oil slick. The importance of tarpaulins, protective clothing, goggles (so you don't have your eyes pecked), knowing basic oiled bird protocols, cardboard and plastic carrying boxes, knowledge of bird behaviour, knowledge of local bird species, beach access points, boat owners who do not mind getting oil on their hulls and most importantly know who your friends really are.

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