SEJournal

Fall 2010, Vol. 20 No. 3

Gulf Oil Calamity

Inside ProPublica's coverage of the oil disaster

SEJ 2010 award winners

Put a little humor on your website

Post-disaster journalism

A quarterly publication of the

Society of Environmental Journalists

Metcalf Institute will offer two programs in 2011 on the emerging science and impacts of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Metcalf provides fellowships for journalists to learn about science and the research process, from interpreting the broad impact of environmental issues to understanding the principles of scientific research.

Science Seminar: Impacts of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

April 2011
Metcalf Institute, Louisiana State University and Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium will offer a 2.5-day seminar for Gulf of Mexico-based journalists and informal science educators. Gain hands-on knowledge of oceanographic techniques and discuss the latest research on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill with leading experts. Includes tuition, room and board. *Application postmark deadline: Jan. 31, 2011.*

13th Annual Science Immersion Workshop for Journalists

Coastal Impacts: One Year of Research on the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill
June 2011
The Metcalf Annual Workshop is a hands-on introduction to research methods, data analysis, translation of scientific research, and integration of science and policy. The Workshop will explore the science and methods used to assess impacts of the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf. Includes tuition, room, board and some travel support. *Application postmark deadline: January 21, 2011.*

fellowships@metcalfinstitute.org
www.metcalfinstitute.org

2011 CALL FOR ENTRIES

the Grantham Prize

for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment

The Grantham Prize honors the work of a journalist or team of journalists for exemplary reporting on environmental or natural resources issues with an award of **$75,000**. Up to three additional entries will receive **$5,000** Awards of Special Merit. The prize was created to encourage outstanding environmental journalism, and to increase public understanding of major environmental issues.

The Grantham Prize is open to U.S. and Canadian works of **non-fiction** produced in the previous calendar year. All media are eligible; full details available at **granthamprize.org**.

Book entries must be postmarked by January 10, 2011.
All other entries must be postmarked by February 4, 2011.

info@granthamprize.org
www.granthamprize.org

Metcalf

Metcalf Institute for Marine & Environmental Reporting ■ University of Rhode Island
Graduate School of Oceanography ■ Narragansett, RI 02882 ■ (401) 874-6211

SEJournal
Fall 2010, Vol. 20 No. 3

TABLE OF CONTENTS

page 24

page 14

features

BP's Gulf oil gusher attracts bewildering amounts of media coverage But where's the depth? page 5
By Robert A. Thomas

Inside Story: The ProPublica team dug deeply and quickly into BP and its Gulf oil mess page 12
By Bill Dawson

The Beat: A surge of stories spews from the darkness of the deep ocean BP oil leak page 16
By Bill Dawson

columns

President's Report: SEJ: A rare flower of international distinction page 4
By Christy George

Reporter's Toolbox: Covering recovery from disasters page 14
By Jim Schwab

E-Biz Reporting: Gulf oil leak shrouds climate change but still holds key lessons page 19
By Bud Ward

Science Survey: The new invader, lionfish, raises major concerns for ocean reef systems page 20
By Rae Tyson

Bits and Bytes: Try a little carp humor to woo more traffic to your online news site page 22

SEJ News: SEJ awarded prestigious international prize page 24
SEJ's 2010 award winners for reporting on the environment page 25

Media on the Move: New blogs, awards and prize-winning books page 27
By Judy Fahys

Book Shelf Book Reviews page 28

COVER PHOTO:
A small oil-drenched heron (its exact species undeterminable) being recovered in late June by coastal management officials from Barataria Bay in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. Photo by Matthew Hinton/ *The Times-Picayune*

SEJ President's Report

SEJ: A rare flower of international distinction

By CHRISTY GEORGE

SEJ has gone international.

We SEJ-ers have been bragging for a long time that at any given time, we represent roughly 1,500 members in more than 30 countries. And a few years ago, we helped set up a group like SEJ in Mexico. But the idea that SEJ exists around the world has truly come home this year.

The most compelling manifestation of SEJ's new global profile was winning this year's Gulbenkian International Prize, awarded for SEJ's contribution to "humanity's relationship with nature and respect for biodiversity." SEJ shared this year's Prize — and €100,000 (that's € for Euros) — with the Institute for Alpine Environment.

SEJ was singled out for environmental journalism's "contribution to creating an informed and enlightened public opinion." (See story, page 24.)

That's exactly what SEJ does. For real.

No one could've been prouder than SEJ Executive Director Beth Parke, who went to Lisbon in July to accept the Gulbenkian Prize on SEJ's behalf. Beth — and the core SEJ staff, Conference Director Jay Letto and Director of Programs and Operations Chris Rigel — have been there from the beginning, nurturing a fledging j-group, feeding and watering this rare new species until it grew into a flower of rare distinction — a world class perennial.

Beth knew better than most of us that SEJ deserved that award. She and other staffers at SEJ's Jenkintown, PA headquarters routinely field queries from environmental journalists abroad — from Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia. These are places where sometimes the biggest problem is not always stonewalling by public officials, but opponents who treat unwanted news coverage as a capital offense. One foreign journalist even sought political asylum at an SEJ conference several years back.

It's no surprise when you think about it. The pace of global environmental change is quickening, and the brunt of the impact falls on the developing world.

While there may be nothing new about reporters under fire, attacks on environmental journalists are escalating. Two Indonesian journalists were murdered within days of one another this past summer. Both wrote about illegal logging. One had recently begun reporting on coal mining.

Apart from the risks we take, we are all surprisingly similar.

I learned that myself this year, starting with a BBC World Service interview in April, looking at the state of environmental reporting, worldwide. Three of us chatted about the beat on a program timed for the 40th anniversary of Earth Day: me in Oregon, *Financial Times* environment reporter Fiona Harvey from London and, in Nairobi, Kenya, was Mildred Barassa, secretary-general of the African Network of Environmental Journalists.

Our conclusions: the environment is the most important story on the planet, and journalism is largely blowing it. (Not us, of course, but those who give thumbs up to 'celebrity news rules', and thumbs down to the latest science on methane releases from melting permafrost.)

I saw evidence of a different disconnect in China in May, on an International Reporting Project Gatekeepers trip. China's government talks bullish on moving to a post-carbon economy, and in Sichuan Province, devastated by a 2008 earthquake, we saw new buildings going up with low-flow toilets and compact fluorescent light bulbs. But when it comes to a choice between protecting the environment or growing China's GDP, the country's powerful environment minister told us GDP wins every time.

SEJ-er James Fahn has been helping journalists from developing countries gain reporting skills through Internews and the Earth Journalism Network. SEJ-ers Bob Thomas, Rob Taylor and SEJ founding president Jim Detjen have all worked with the International Federation of Environmental Journalists, helping environmental journalists everywhere become watchdogs in their own countries.

Then there's the fledgling international environmental journalists exchange program, started by Tom Yulsman of the Center for Environmental Journalism at UC Boulder, and Reggie Dale of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

Starting with an invitation on the SEJ-Talk listserv in the fall of 2008, the Transatlantic Media Network (TMN) has brought together beat reporters from Europe and the U.S. three times to share stories and compare notes. The most recent meeting, in Copenhagen this past summer, looked at what went wrong at the 2009 climate summit and the state of journalism in Europe. It turns out Europe is now experiencing a news business meltdown, about a year behind the United States.

There really is a global economy, and we're all in it.

And we're hearing a lot lately from our international members, who want the same rights and privileges our North American members get. When we launched the Fund for Environmental Journalism, we heard from members abroad that they wanted to be eligible for the fund, too. When we put the word out that the University of Montana was generously making it possible to bring 20 SEJ members to this year's conference, we also heard from members beyond the U.S., Canada and Mexico. Why, they asked, can't we get a fellowship to Missoula, too?

Why, indeed?

Sure, there might be complications with visas and foreign currency and sure, there would be applications proposing projects the SEJ judges know little about. But for our international organization those are minor points compared to the value of sharing with environmental journalists from Algeria, Estonia, Iran and Nepal.

So keep your eyes open in Montana, because we did open up those SEJ conference fellowships to everyone. At 3p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 13th, in Missoula, twelve European journalists will be on hand to talk about their work — and yours.

Please come, and meet your peers on the planet.

PHOTO BY CAROLYN COLE / *LOS ANGELES TIMES*

A boat penetrates the leading edge of the approaching oil in the northern Gulf of Mexico near Louisiana's Chandeleur Islands.

BP's Gulf oil gusher attracts bewildering amounts of media coverage. But where's the depth?

By ROBERT A. THOMAS

The quality of the coverage on the oil gusher depends on where you live and what you listen to, watch or read. New Orleans' *The Times-Picayune*, one of the resident newspapers, has been a treasure chest of stories from every angle imaginable. In contrast, New York journalist Dale Willman noted that *The Times-Union* had front-page coverage early in the catastrophe, and now has an occasional article buried deeply.

In large part, small media markets are getting most of their news about the gusher from TV and AP feeds.

The BP oil gusher led news coverage nine of the 15 weeks through August 1st, was second three times, and third three times (See Table 1on page 8).

Overall, the media performed admirably throughout the BP Deepwater Horizon gusher disaster. Local and regional newspapers served their audiences with intense and incisive coverage, using excellent communication tools. Local television was superb, deploying an array of reporters, including investigative teams, while national television stayed with the subject from its first gush. Their anchors and top reporters repeatedly visited the coast. Talk radio offered continuous coverage and a portal for citizens to report on their experiences and offer their concerns.

I do believe that the media's coverage of this disaster, following closely on the heels of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, has taken the U.S. media to a higher level of performance in communicating extraordinarily complex and difficult information to the local, national, and international audiences. This may be of special note since a large media segment, local and regional newspapers, had to perform despite smaller staffs and tighter budgets.

But the media's performance in the coverage of the Gulf calamity remains an unfinished story. The daily, breaking news story of a deepwater well that seemingly couldn't be stanched now holds a greater challenge: Depth.

An invasion of reporters

Local journalists were at the epicenter of the oil disaster; those who have worked the environment and associated beats

continued on page 7

SEJournal

Visit www.sej.org

SEJournal (ISSN: 1053-7082) is published quarterly by the **Society of Environmental Journalists, P.O. Box 2492, Jenkintown, PA 19046.** Ph: 215-884-8174. Fax: 215-884-8175. Send story ideas, articles, news briefs, tips and letters to Editor Mike Mansur, Kansas City Star, mansur.michael@gmail.com. The Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) is a non-profit, tax exempt, 501(c)3 organization funded by grants from foundations, universities and media companies, member dues and fees for services. SEJ does not accept gifts or grants from non-media corporations, government agencies or advocacy groups. Its membership is limited to journalists, educators and students who do not lobby or do public relations work on environmental issues. For non-member subscription information go to www.sej.org and click "Publications."

SEJ

To strengthen the quality, reach and viability of journalism across all media to advance public understanding of environmental issues

The Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) is a non-profit, tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) organization. The mission of SEJ is to strengthen the quality, reach and viability of journalism across all media to advance public understanding of environmental issues. As a network of journalists and academics, SEJ offers national and regional conferences, publications and online services. SEJ's membership of more than 1,500 includes journalists working for print and electronic media, educators, and students. Non-members are welcome to attend SEJ's annual conferences and to subscribe to the quarterly *SEJournal.*

Send story ideas, articles, news briefs, tips and letters to the editor Mike Mansur, Kansas City Star, 1729 Grant Ave., Kansas City, Mo. 64108, mansur.michael@gmail.com
To submit books for review, contact Elizabeth Bluemink at ebluemink@gmail.com

For inquiries regarding the SEJ, please contact the SEJ office, PO Box 2492, Jenkintown, PA 19046; Ph: (215) 884-8174; Fax: (215) 884-8175; E-mail sej@sej.org

SEJournal Submission Deadlines

Spring Issue	February 1
Summer Issue	May 1
Fall Issue	August 1
Winter Issue	November 1

To Advertise in SEJournal

Advertising rates are available on the SEJ website at www.sej.org or by emailing lknouse@sej.org

To Subscribe to SEJournal

Subscription information is available on the SEJ website at www.sej.org or by emailing lknouse@sej.org

From the printer of SEJournal: Our coated paper choices are 10% to 30% post consumer waste, SFI Participant, FSC Certified, or both. One supplier is a member of the Rainforest Alliance. The pages are printed with a soy based ink ... the entire journal can be recycled just like any other paper — although I don't know why someone would throw away such a fine publication.

(as in most emergencies, reporters from a variety of areas were brought to the coverage team and their talents improve public understanding) were well acquainted with run-of-the-mill oil and gas issues. For the current calamity, they were on the ground every day, developing stories that compare events associated with the oil dilemma and the past. They tended to not get involved in the hysteria associated with access denial, and had their editors and experienced colleagues helping them circumvent barriers set by BP and the Coast Guard. Many of the challenges discussed on the SEJ listserv were non-issues for locals.

Conversely, the nationals tended to either focus on larger elements of the saga or send reporters to cover their normal beats or specialties in the coastal zone. An excellent example is Ylan Mui, a native New Orleanian of Vietnamese descent, graduate of the journalism program at Loyola, and now with *The Washington Post*. Mui came to the coast on assignment to cover the impacts of the oiled Gulf on the largely fisheries-dependent Vietnamese population.

An early issue in the coverage was that reporters were calling the gusher a spill. Louisiana and the northern Gulf are no strangers to oil spills of various sizes. After the BP event, where the gusher raged for 87 days with no sign of the source drying up, a spill of a known quantity seemed almost comforting.

But as the importance of events became self-evident, everyone and every issue became infused with drama. The number and breadth of reporters soared. Reporters of every ilk descended on Venice. Rick Jervis, a reporter with *USA Today*, said, "Everyone expected Prince William Sound level impacts. They braced for an acute crisis and encountered an event whose visible symptoms came gradually and painfully." All had to decide how to cover, how long to stay, and their level of commitment. Most of the international cadre left in May, as did several large regional newspapers.

There were interesting logistical complications. The earliest arriving journalists found rooms readily available in the Venice, La. area. As BP took more and more rooms for their workers, there were no places for journalists to stay, causing many of them to add several hours per day for travel time to their congested schedules.

The first day President Obama arrived, 12 days after the tragedy, I flew over the oil slicks with Brazilian Globo TV, sat in the studios of WVUE-TV, and then drove to Venice where there was a veritable feeding frenzy of reporters hoping to interview the president. There was a camera crew every 100 yards doing standup, and the area outside where the president was being briefed had everyone from *Al Jazeera* to *The Economist* and The CBS Early Show. What started as a story of a tragic, life-taking explosion turned into a potpourri of in-depth stories of many creative angles, such as human impacts, the oil and gas industry, economic effects, the future of fishers and their trade, and more.

U.S. COAST GUARD PHOTO BY PO3 PATRICK KELLEY

Taking a break to cool off, a BP contract worker lets the breeze fill his contamination suit as he cleans up a beach at Port Fourchon, Louisiana in late May. Hundreds of such contractors were hired after oil from the Deepwater Horizon mobile offshore drilling rig began washing up on beaches one month after it exploded.

The stories

A subtle messaging trend was evident whereby editors make coverage decisions based on what their institution does well (economics, environment, oil and gas policy).

There were immediate comparisons to the Exxon Valdez and Prince William Sound, but astute journalists immediately reported that this calamity was different. The northern Gulf is not rocky seashore, the water is not cold, the crude is Louisiana Lite and not heavy crude, the oil is not leaking from a maximum load of 53 million gallons, and more. It soon became apparent that this type of catastrophe had never happened before, so there was a bevy of unknowns.

By day 100, more people were sharing ideas that the negative environmental impacts may not be as bad as forecasted. While many were predicting impending doom, some reputable groups (such as the Barataria-Terrebone National Estuary Program based in Thibodaux, La.) were suggesting that early evidence, like formerly oiled marshes that are now "greening up," indicates recovery is happening.

On day 101, Sandra Bullock stirred up the media by asking to be at least temporarily deleted from the "Be the One" video that, accompanied by a petition to conserve the coast, spread exponentially. She was informed by *DeSmogBlog* that Women of the Storm, the sponsoring not-for-profit, and one of its partners, the America's WETLAND Campaign, were receiving funds from a variety of oil companies, and Bullock wanted time to verify those accusations. Immediately covered by the *Huffington Post* and popular culture media, this announcement quickly had impact on other media's choices of topics.

Fishers and their profession experienced a new level of visibility. They had a chance to tell their stories and explain their culture to a national audience.

BP's now former CEO Tony Hayward's occasional gaffes dominated news times for short periods and were thereafter continually mentioned, especially by television and talk radio. David Hammer, *The Times-Picayune* staff reporter, believes too much was made of these comments. They should have been reported, then the media should have moved on.

Flow of information

BP and the rest of the unified command team held easily accessed and frequent press meetings, some live and some by

phone. But most reporters will share that BP controlled the flow of information and seldom truly communicated thoroughly to the extent needed by the media. Among BP's biggest failings was not correcting incorrect information. The company simply let it slide.

Related to the control of the flow of information was the attitude of the Coast Guard and BP toward local leaders and citizens. They patrolled beaches and marshes and interrogated those they met. Over the protests of local officials and citizen groups, they removed the barges that were set at the entrances to Lake Pontchartrain to protect the estuarine embayment from surface-driven oil. They also were no-shows at a summit called by leaders in a wide array of coastal communities to discuss their activities.

One point generating much frustration along the coast was that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) was tight-lipped about data gathered in the Gulf. Reporters and scientists alike were denied access. In early August, NOAA finally issued a press release saying that only about 26% of the BP oil can be accounted for, meaning that about 74% is gone. Scientists who work on oil in marine systems are now testing these data. The good news? Information was finally being shared by NOAA.

An issue first reported in July by Ben Raines of Mobile's *The Press-Register* concerned BP-funded scientists having to check with the Unified Command Joint Information Center before talking to the media. This is a form of censorship that blocks the ability of reporters to adequately cover coastal challenges caused by the gusher.

As in all calamities, speculation flourished. Similar to post-Katrina, rumors were ever present and the national press and especially the blogosphere, not being as familiar with local issues, were more likely to cover the rumors.

An example is the rumor that technicians from Schlumberger, a large oil services company, were on the BP oil rig to perform the final, very important battery of tests. As the rumor goes, they realized the rig was going to explode, so they left without performing their tests. This rumor was dispelled by investigative work by David Hammer, *The Times-Picayune*, but it is still mentioned in blogs.

It goes without saying that the BP catastrophe is complicated and very technical. In the early days, the focus was on the actual explosion, with only a suggestion of what was to come.

Oil's Play in Mainstream Media

Dates	Place	Percentage Newshole
July 26-Aug 1	3	12
July 19-25	3	12
July 12-18	1	20
July 5-11	1	15
June 28-July 4	1	15
June 21-27	2	23
June 14-20	1	44
June 7-13	1	34
May 31-June 6	1	35
May 24-30	1	38
May 17-23	1	18
May 10-16	1	17
May 3-9	2	20
April 26-May 2	2	16
April 19-25	3	5

BP oil gusher weekly place and percentage of newshole since the catastrophe occurred.
Source: Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism News Coverage Index website.

Media stars born

One of the media stars post-Katrina was Richard Campanella. He is a superb storyteller and is equipped with marvelous maps of everything demographic and geographic in the New Orleans area. Since the storm, Campanella is in high demand as a speaker and gathering organizer for all things New Orleans. Before the storm, Campanella was not widely known in the community. He ran a GIS lab at Tulane University and worked on scholarly studies on the history and associated geography of the region. Just before Katrina hit, Campanella submitted for publication a book entitled *Geographies of New Orleans*, chock full of maps and an in-depth analysis of the process by which New Orleans developed over time. He gave a talk to a large group of planners and engaged citizens using his previously unseen slides and was catapulted to his present status of information guru.

This "Campanella Effect" seems to happen with each disaster. When the BP oil tragedy unfolded, Professor Eric Smith was quietly working in the Tulane (University) Energy Institute. Smith spent most of his career in the oil industry, and he is acutely aware of the technology of oil exploration. He is also an excellent communicator of that information and served the media just as Campanella did for Hurricane Katrina.

As usual, most bench scientists were reluctant to engage in the media discussion. The tension between reporters and scientists peaks during periods of a plethora of unknowns, and the BP oil gusher fit the model. There were notable exceptions, and the citizens are better off for it. As always, there were scientists who stepped into the limelight: Shirley Laska, a retired sociologist from the University of New Orleans, Denise Reed, a wetland ecologist from the same institution, Ed Overton and Ralph Portier, environmental scientists who specialize in oil at LSU, and a host of economists. Loyola University has responded by offering media training for those specialties that are likely to be called upon during disasters.

State and local politicians became media darlings. They were on camera every day, speaking passionately about their opinions on how to move forward. Polls showed their messages and techniques were resonating with citizens.

It was evident that elected officials had been loath to seek guidance from the world-renowned coastal scientists in Louisiana regarding empirically tested solutions. This has caused tremendous consternation among long-tenured coastal advocates, but the officials' actions, no matter how severely criticized by scientists and not-for-profit wetland organizations, were embraced by the public, as shown in polls.

TV coverage shines

It goes without saying that all media have been active: print, television, radio, blogs, and magazines. Additionally, certain not-for-profit organizations have contributed valuable information.

People expect newspapers to be thorough in their coverage,

PHOTO BY CAROLYN COLE / *LOS ANGELES TIMES*

Support vessels surround the Q4000, right, in the Gulf of Mexico during flaring operations at twilight.

especially the larger locals such as *The Times-Picayune*, Baton Rouge's *The Advocate* and *The Press-Register*. They also typically expect TV to give less depth but more pointed coverage. One of the pleasant surprises was the detailed and extensive coverage given by the majors: ABC, CBS, CNN and NBC. All had news crews combing the coast, and it was not unusual to have prime-time anchors giving extensive reports from the field. Andrew Tyndall (in Bauder, 2010) reported that through July 16th, ABC, CBS, and NBC aired a total of 1,183 minutes of oil gusher news, approximately "one-third of the broadcast time over a two-month period."

The Times-Picayune has done a phenomenal job sleuthing out every angle of the catastrophe. Their staff members, like those at most U.S. newspapers, have been subjected to recent budget cuts and accompanying reductions. The paper has consistently delivered an excellent product to its readers. But the BP catastrophe tested the paper's limits, and it became apparent to the reporting team that their bench was too thin. Their accomplishments with Katrina/Rita could not be repeated, not because of a dearth of talent, but because of the depth of the team. It has served the public well by focusing on what it does well and efficiently, but it has avoided coverage where staff was lacking, such as doing detailed investigative work, leafing through files, etc. According to Mark Schleifstein, environment reporter with *The Times-Picayune*, it also expanded its pairing with ProPublica, not only joint venturing, as it did with the Danziger Bridge shootings post-Katrina, but now publishing its work directly.

Schleifstein added that *The Times-Picayune* used talented interns and painstakingly chose topics to focus coverage on the most important regional issues, resisting the urge to cover issues that may be of wider appeal nationally. As an example, the nationals discovered how the oil industry co-opted the Minerals Management Service (MMS) (now the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement) process, a tedious investigative job that required larger staffs and a major presence away from the coast.

The Times-Picayune, among many others, effectively used graphics to convey its messaging. There was a host of graphics showing how the oil industry was attempting to resolve the gusher, and the Animated Graphic Summarizing the Deepwater Horizon Disaster (http://tinyurl.com/22oertk). Among the most important web posts were the live feeds from the BP ROVs that allowed everyone to view what was actually happening 5,000 feet below the surface. It was mesmerizing to watch the crude oil belch out of the earth. Valerie Brown, science and environment writer and member of the Society of Environmental Journalists, considered it a disorder she called *spillcam hypnosis*.

USA Today has given good coverage, and that is largely due to having a correspondent based in New Orleans. He was among the first on the scene and has continued the stream of important articles reaching the paper's wide audience.

Environmental, animal concern, social justice, and sustainable energy groups arrived soon after the explosion. They have sustained their activities, communicating with their constituents and the media as well as advocating for their individual agendas.

During Katrina, an extremely valuable resource for the public evolved in the form of the United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans, 15 regional stations that simulcast the same broadcast using shared show hosts. This was the area's primary source of logistical, health, safety, environmental, etc. information. Although there has been no simulcast, talk radio has risen to the occasion once again and can be heard everywhere one goes and is on in every car and most offices. Spokespersons from BP, the Coast Guard, elected officials, and a host of experts are rotating through the shows. Callers fill in with their questions and views and show hosts share their opinions and frustrations each and every day. *WWL* radio, for example, posts its podcasts on its website, making them available for listeners to revisit.

The Louisiana Bucket Brigade is a local environmental

PHOTO BY JOHN MCCUSKER / *THE TIMES-PICAYUNE*

A shrimp boat adaptively re-rigged for clean-up duty drags skimmers through the oil slick over the Gulf of Mexico in early May.

activist group that works with communities that must coexist with petrochemical companies. The group is strident and lean. Since it works with marginalized populations, it uses simple yet creative approaches. Its website's Oil Spill Crisis Map plots places where individuals have submitted information relating to their contact and experiences with the oil gusher or its effects. The group verified as many of the reports as possible, yet there is no external review by independent groups. This site gave journalists an innovative way to feel the pulse of individuals' concerns.

Big negative: Coverage depth

It is not surprising that there are negatives resulting from the intensity of the coverage. The breadth of coverage is admirable, but its depth is shallow. This should fix itself over time as reporters begin to prioritize by importance and delve deeper into the issues.

The Times-Picayune, and undoubtedly other coastal papers, was overwhelmed and unable to get to other important issues, such as $5 billion in local levee construction planned for this year. Staffs of coastal papers and stations were exhausted. Not only was the learning curve steep, but the stress of urgency was also immense. Nationals were seduced by false claims and accusations and have given more credence to local officials' rants than have locals, just as during Katrina.

Coverage depth was impacted by government agencies not sharing data equally with all audiences, including journalists. NOAA's close-to-the-vest policy resulted in data collected about locations of oil plumes and other relevant marine data only being shared with the Coast Guard and BP.

In turn, the Coast Guard and BP didn't share much either. That sometimes forced reporters to seek comments from sources without the data. At this writing, I just received a call from a television station to discuss the potential negative impact of oil plumes. This is no less than the 20th time I've been asked to comment on this same topic in the last month. I have an excellent understanding of the dynamics of the subsurface ecosystem, but I'm not a bench scientist whose lab is actively engaged in such studies. Some reporters too often used preliminary data as definitive, transmitting false comfort or unfounded alarm.

The future lessons

Chris Kirkham, staff reporter for *The Times-Picayune*, opines, "Local reporters will follow the lingering effects of the oil long after the camera crews are gone." He further asserts that locals "Will get deeper, deeper and deeper into the issues. Our work may not make a splash nationally, but it will have high impact regionally."

Based on past experience, ranging from Love Canal to Three Mile Island to Hurricane Hugo and more, the BP oil disaster will not soon be forgotten. The normal trend is that national media will occasionally revisit the event and its aftermath, while Gulf Coast media will incorporate it in every related discussion and they will frequently present updates and new findings. They won't have difficulty finding information, because the alleged largest environmental disaster in U.S. history is a fertile research area of all the fields of biophysical and social sciences.

Crisis reporting morphs into more thoughtful, analytical reporting. What were the real aftermaths vs. those predicted in the heat of the disaster? What predicted public health concerns were manifested, and what unexpected issues emerged? What was the ultimate impact of oil plumes and dispersants? How and when did fish and other Gulf biota recover? A related issue, when did the impacts on larvae and eggs floating in the water column appear? How did oyster populations respond? How did coastal communities and cultures adapt?

We do know that ultra-grim predictions tend to be over dramatized. We also know that we're not sure of the extent of damage to our ecosystem. Short term negative impacts appear less than originally predicted, but we don't know about long-term issues. Experience from the 1979 Ixtoc blowout in the Bay of Campeche tells us changes may occur in subtle ways. Fairly recent studies have shown changes in fiddler crab behaviors that

make them more vulnerable to predation. What will happen to the components of the northern Gulf of Mexico fauna?

Interestingly, specialists such as Ivor van Heerden, a scientist who led Team Louisiana in its work to show that poor levee construction resulted in most of the flooding during the Katrina disaster and now employed by an oil spill response contractor, and Kerry St. Pé, director of the Baratarian-Terrebone National Estuary Program, are suggesting that the ultimate result of the BP oil may not be as bad as expected. Recently, this was the topic of discussion in articles in *The New York Times*, *Time* and on several national TV newscasts. Certainly, this will be a central theme of future reporting.

More to be explored

Living in a place where I am bombarded 24/7/365 with breaking news, summation reports, opinion, talk show radio, all news casts, blogs, telephone calls, meetings, interviews, discussions over coffee, and more, it is difficult at this time to identify topics that have not been covered. Depth, yes; topics, no.

Here's some obvious areas for more reporting:

- What is the depth of damage actually done? This will come as the data are compiled and released.
- What do we know about seafood safety? This is being prepared for release soon, and is of grave concern not only to coastal people who eat it daily, but all Americans since a large percentage of our national seafood consumption originates in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Why are Louisianans so accepting of the oil industry? This has been covered, but not as thoroughly as it should. We also need context. Do Louisianans feel the same about oil and gas as West Virginians about coal mining? Utah citizens about other forms of mining? Floridians about over-urbanization? Do people really believe that all Louisianans love oil and gas, even those who may oppose the moratorium for purely practical, economic reasons?
- Will there be synergism between remains of the oil gusher and the hypoxic (dead) zone?
- What actually happened at the explosion? Reporters early on the scene found that survivors on the Deep Horizon were quickly signed on with lawyers, so they couldn't speak to the press. This story is just emerging from the Deepwater Horizon Joint Investigative hearings, and certainly will be a focal point of interest over the coming months.
- How good was the federal oversight of the oil industry? Why did the MMS fail to adequately regulate the industry? It appears that it was not a dearth of regulatory procedures and laws.
- How useful are officially accepted Oil Spill Response Plans? How could MMS have failed to catch the flaws in the BP plan (mentioning plans for handling the needs of seals, sea lions, walruses, and sea otters, none of which occur in the Gulf of Mexico)? How many similar plans are sitting in this and other federal agency files?

During August 2010, Mark Schleifstein instigated an interesting thread on the SEJ listserv with the subject line "one year, two years redux" that solicited ideas for continued coverage on the BP oil gusher, and the SEJ membership responded appropriately.

But here may be the biggest challenge: How do we deal with the bewildering quantity of new information, none of which existed before April 20, 2010?

Somehow finding the key lessons from this Gulf disaster may be a bit like trying to shut off a gushing oil well thousands of feet below the sea's surface. It obviously will take more time, more reports and more thought.

But inklings of the lessons may already be developing in interesting ways. Each day, *The Times-Picayune* publishes an updated map of the present location, size, and density of surface oil, landed oil, and the area of uncertainty. These visual recaps lead me to believe that periodic revisits and summaries of important, standardized data will help the curious reader/viewer follow important events and help people understand complex information to which they have not been exposed.

Robert A. Thomas, professor and director, Loyola Center for Environmental Communication, School of Mass Communication, Loyola University New Orleans, can be reached at rathomas@loyno.edu

ProPublica team dug deeply and quickly into BP and its Gulf oil mess

By BILL DAWSON

Abrahm Lustgarten is a reporter for New York-based ProPublica, which describes itself as "an independent, non-profit newsroom that produces investigative journalism in the public interest." He has reported for ProPublica on the boom in natural gas drilling in several parts of the U.S. and on issues related to the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

PHOTO BY LARS KLOVE

Abrahm Lustgarten

Lustgarten is a former staff writer and contributor for *Fortune* who also wrote for *Salon*, *Esquire*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* before joining ProPublica.

He won the 2009 George Polk Award for Environmental Reporting for his ProPublica coverage of environmental hazards associated with hydraulic fracturing, a method of drilling for natural gas. He and other ProPublica staff members involved in that coverage also won the Society of Professional Journalists' 2009 Sigma Delta Chi Award for online investigative reporting.

Lustgarten answered questions emailed by *SEJournal*'s Inside Story about ProPublica's coverage of the Gulf spill. He will be writing a book about BP's leadership culture and its environmental and safety record in the years leading up to the spill.

Q: When did you join ProPublica? What was your prior experience in reporting on environmental issues?

A: I joined ProPublica at its inception, in April 2008. I'd been reporting since about 1996, and focused increasingly intensively on environmental issues since about 2003. From 2004-2007 I was a writer at *Fortune*, where I focused on both the energy and resource industries, and on the evolution of "green" or sustainable business opportunities and investment. At *Fortune*, this was the way to cover the environment. Besides clear environmental and pollution concerns addressed in magazine feature stories like those about the tar sands in Alberta (2006) and uranium mining in Kazakhstan (2007) and natural gas drilling in Sakhalin (2008), I wrote about issues ranging from Walmart's sustainability efforts to BP's "green" rebranding effort, the evolution of sustainability indexes and carbon trading like the Chicago Climate Exchange, and about new ways of evaluating environmental impact economically, like Joseph Stiglitz's concept of Green GDP.

From 2001 to 2005 I also worked on an investigative book project about China's westward development and the construction of a railway to settle the Tibetan Autonomous Region (*China's Great Train: Beijing's Drive West and the Campaign to Remake Tibet*). That book, among several important economic and social issues, also chronicled the climate change trends of the melting permafrost on the Tibetan Plateau, and the race for mineral and water resources in the plateau and Himalayan regions.

Q: The oil spill at the BP well started on April 20 with an explosion that killed 11 workers and injured another 17. ProPublica's first story — a piece on the Minerals Management Service by staff reporter-blogger Marian Wang — was posted on April 29. You had a pair of stories the next day — one on BP's environmental and safety problems leading up to the Gulf spill and another on the hazards of oil-dispersing chemicals. When and how was it decided that ProPublica — founded as an investigative reporting organization — would start doing investigative coverage on this breaking story? Were there any previous, rapidly changing stories that ProPublica jumped on in a similar way?

A: ProPublica's coverage of the spill in the Gulf has been an experiment from the start, and a departure from how we have covered other topics. We both recognized the Gulf spill as an important environmental story that would frame the year's news, and also as an opportunity to weigh in with a certain amount of expertise, since I had covered BP for several years at *Fortune*, and also gained considerable knowledge of drilling topics like well-drilling procedures, cementing and blowout preventers and chemical use, largely stemming from my coverage of the natural gas industry. The question, of course, was how we could cover the Gulf spill without competing with the daily newspapers, and adding substantially to the conversation based on our strengths.

We sought to do several things — use Marian's blog posts to highlight developments and other reporting that we felt had an accountability angle, and then to devote more intensive reporting to other opportunities as they arose. At first, it was easy to get out ahead of the pack. I knew BP's history and saw the Gulf accident in that context. And no one was asking questions about the use of chemical dispersants at the time I published our first article about them.

After a few weeks the competition in these areas became more heated, and we backed off to focus on a long term investigation of BP, still in progress. We said from the start that we would not focus intensely on what went wrong in the Gulf, because we expected other news organizations to quickly provide that coverage. We aimed to cover the periphery of this issue, and find interesting stories where few others were looking.

Q: No one knew, of course, how long the oil would continue to gush from the damaged well. Did you and your colleagues begin your reporting with a long-range coverage plan? To what extent did your coverage decisions evolve as news developments occurred? Were there key coverage aims or specific story ideas from the start? Did the level of ProPublica's engagement with the story grow as the spill continued?

A: We recognized early on that the Gulf story would last six months at a minimum, if not far longer. We didn't have a specific plan, necessarily, except to seize opportunities to do reporting we felt wasn't being done elsewhere, and to try to fill gaps left by other

reports. Our coverage has been a very fluid and spontaneous effort, with the exception of our one long-term investigation that is still under way. Marian Wang, as I said, does daily reports that can answer a simple question or two, or which highlight good reporting in other publications. I lead our more in-depth coverage and reporting.

U.S. Air Force Photo by Senior Airman Bryan Nealy

An aerial view of booming operations near Grand Isle, where containment boom has become a very common sight.

Q: I'm posing these questions in mid-July. ProPublica has produced dozens of articles on the spill since the first ones back in April. How many staff and freelance journalists have been involved in this coverage? How were the reporting duties divided up? For instance, how did your role differ from that of Wang, another staff member whose byline has appeared on a lot of ProPublica's spill stories?

A: There are essentially only two of us here working on ongoing Gulf-related coverage; myself and Marian Wang. Ryan Knutson was a talented summer intern and helped with my initial investigation into BP's history of safety concerns. And he followed up with our reports on the history of the Texas City Refinery while I was reporting in Alaska. Ryan has since moved on to Frontline, where he is working on their end on a joint documentary project with ProPublica based on my investigation into BP's history and leadership culture.

Q: A notice was posted on ProPublica's website inviting BP employees and contractors in the Gulf to provide confidential information about work conditions and management and their observations. What kind of response did you get? Did any information or documents that you received lead to stories?

A: Our solicitation of sources proved extremely helpful. Many present and former BP employees contacted me, often after learning that we could use their information on a background basis and did not need to make their names public. Mostly the solicitation helped us build out a sense of what it is like to work at BP, and to learn about operations at a number of specific facilities. Documents were mostly sourced elsewhere, the result of relationships that required a bit more coaxing and cultivation with people in more senior positions.

Q: On June 7, a story that you wrote reported that internal BP investigations, which were previously undisclosed, had led to warnings that the company's chronic disregard for safety and environmental rules might lead to accidents. Along with other documents, you wrote, they "portray a company that systemically ignored its own safety policies across its North American operations — from Alaska to the Gulf of Mexico to California and Texas." A version of the story was co-published by *The Washington Post*. Please tell me some of the key details that you can divulge about how the story came about.

A: The foundational basis for this story was my past experience reporting on BP and other oil industry majors over several years. I had a running start with long-time source relationships, including some people in very senior management positions. At about the same time that I was digging into internal documents and investigations at BP, I was introduced to several BP contract workers who shared stories about specific incidents and facilities that were allowed to operate out of compliance with regulatory and company guidelines. These leads, combined with some good hard digging into public records and court documents, led to most of what was included in that report.

Q: What are some of the key ways that ProPublica's BP coverage has differed from your reporting on natural gas drilling — both in terms of the reporting process and the published product?

A: Getting an inside view of how BP works has required careful and patient cultivation of relationships more than almost any other story I have worked on. Where the gas drilling investigation was more dependent on collecting obscure public records from regulatory agencies and on studying scientific and geologic processes that few others had the patience to delve into, the BP reporting is almost entirely dependent on individuals' willingness to divulge confidential information. Most of the information for the BP stories was either private internal data or publications, or protected by confidentiality agreements with former workers. Whereas the gas drilling story was colored by environmental groups and "victims" who were eager to share their perspectives, the subjects of the BP story have taken great risks to work with us and needed coaxing to do so.

Q: At this point in mid-July — a few days after a containment cap reportedly stopped the flow of oil from the damaged well — is ProPublica planning to continue its investigatory coverage of the spill story and related subjects?

A: Yes. I am working on a joint project with PBS Frontline that will air October 27, an hour-long documentary about BP. I will write several incremental news stories between now and then, and a larger print project around that air date as well. And Marian will continue to recap the daily events related to the cleanup in the Gulf. As I mentioned, I am also working on a book project.

Bill Dawson is assistant editor of the SEJournal. *Contact him at b.dawson@earthlink.net.*

Covering Recovery from Disasters

Part I: Local Issues

By JIM SCHWAB

PHOTO: BY CR ARTIST/LOUIS VIA FLICKR

Following the June 2008 floods in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, residents piled large amounts of debris from their homes curbside for eventual pick-up.

Name your disaster. A tornado, hurricane, wildfire, earthquake, or flood strikes your community. Covering the event itself may seem like fairly straightforward journalism: What was the extent and magnitude of the event, how many people were killed or injured, how much property damage occurred, where, and of what type? And what are local officials and utilities doing to restore normal life?

The impact of such events, however, can linger for years. Good journalists can follow that story in detail and ask the probing questions that may lead to real changes that improve public safety and quality of life. The result can be a series of intriguing articles about how well a community prepares, not only for the emergency itself, but for the long process of economic, social, and environmental recovery over time. In many cases, diligent reporters may find themselves better informed on such issues in the end than the local officials they are covering.

Dynamics of Recovery

The serious study of post-disaster recovery as a social process is probably no more than 30 years old. The early research literature on the subject is slim, but the volume has multiplied exponentially in recent years, spurred especially by Hurricane Katrina. That event in many ways was a departure from the normal pattern, particularly with the extent of its diaspora. But every process of long-term community recovery involves certain essential questions that tend to determine its trajectory:

- Scale: Is it a small disaster, such as a tornado largely affecting a single small town, or a regional catastrophe, such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which together affected a declared disaster area the size of the United Kingdom? Small areas may prove far more manageable when adequate resources are brought to bear on the problem, while the sheer scale of disaster on the Gulf Coast has left many people feeling daunted.
- Impact: Pre-existing social and economic inequities can produce differing rates of recovery within the affected community. It is axiomatic that poor neighborhoods have fewer resources with which to rebuild, may have lower rates of flood or other hazard insurance, and may experience greater levels of social isolation than wealthier neighborhoods. On the other hand, you have to examine the political cultures of the areas in question. Some poorer areas may find effective champions, while some middle-class areas may prove stunningly dysfunctional in the face of crisis. But these differing recovery rates can make for some fascinating journalism if you are willing to dig into the details to find out what makes recovery tick.
- Preparation: How well did local authorities anticipate the nature and magnitude of what happened, and why? Look at the tools they should have used to conduct a risk analysis beforehand: local hazard mitigation plans (now required for eligibility for most federal mitigation grants), emergency operations plans, hazard-related elements of local master plans (if either exist), and, in rare instances so far, post-disaster recovery plans that anticipate issues the community will face after a disaster. More on some of these plans will appear in Part 2 of this series in the next issue of the *SEJournal*.

Silver Linings in Dark Clouds

The impact of failed or ineffective recovery on a community can be devastating. Communities already in economic decline typically see that decline accelerated. On the other hand, communities with imaginative leadership, like Greensburg, Kansas, may find in recovery a silver lining allowing them to refashion their pattern of development in ways that revitalize their economies for years to come. Greensburg, nearly obliterated by an extremely powerful tornado in May 2007, has reinvented itself as a poster child of green post-disaster redevelopment. Mayor Bob Dixson has become a national spokesman for the concept, showcasing the town's eco-friendly designs for public buildings, new wind energy business, and compact development. I had the chance to observe the rare missionary enthusiasm he brings to this topic while moderating a session at the 2009 American Planning Association National Planning Conference, in Minneapolis, in which he spoke along with Stephen Hardy, the consultant who developed the 1,200-resident town's new "Sustainable Comprehensive Plan." One result is that an aging, shrinking community has begun to attract younger families with children who want to attach themselves to a new, inspiring vision of what a small town in western Kansas can become in spite of the obstacles.

The statistics on small businesses surviving disasters are grim. Typically, at least one-third do not make it, largely because they lack the means to overcome existing vulnerabilities and cannot weather declines in business while repairs are done, workers

disappear, and delays in reopening sap profits. However, a flip side of every disaster is that some businesses do very well — those primarily involved in building repairs or supplies, for instance. In the absence of strict local controls, the vultures may also descend on the carcass in the form of repair scams and other consumer ripoffs. These involve important local stories if someone is prepared to investigate and report such schemes.

Recovery also entails opportunities for communities to undertake major environmental improvements if local advocates are prepared to make compelling connections between issues like floodplain land use, open space, and the losses people have suffered. This article is not nearly long enough to explore such considerations, but ample literature exists concerning the role of green infrastructure in alleviating natural hazard vulnerabilities at local and regional scales. The most powerful example is perhaps the steady erosion of coastal wetlands in Louisiana and how it exacerbates disaster impacts on inland areas. It is important for communities to incorporate such longer-term considerations into post-disaster recovery plans as well as into their comprehensive planning and plan implementation efforts.

Rallying for Recovery

The élan of a community is critical in mustering civic effort toward recovery. New Orleans suffered mightily after Hurricane Katrina from widespread distrust of local and state government and a weak tradition of public involvement in planning. That situation has improved significantly, but at great initial cost. A major part of the story of recovery is how citizens participate in planning their future, both before the event happens, in shaping hazard mitigation and post-disaster recovery plans, and afterward. FEMA has the authority to provide assistance for long-term recovery under Emergency Support Function 14 (ESF-14) of the National Response Framework. The resulting interaction is a key focus of Part 2 of this Reporter's Toolbox series, but a reporter who misses this piece of the action after a disaster is missing a lot. Look closely at plans to engage the public in planning its own future and at public attitudes toward the process.

One intriguing, if wildly idiosyncratic, example is the process that took hold in Galveston, Texas, often over the objections of federal recovery officials. The city invited all interested citizens to join the planning effort, and more than 300 signed up. They were divided into numerous committees, worked diligently, and produced a plan. Whatever its strengths or flaws, the plan mustered widespread participation that won vital support for any measures the city chose to implement.

It helps for a community to have a civic culture that *expects* to participate. If that does not exist, it is worth asking why. The answers may expose a number of other issues affecting the viability of local post-disaster recovery.

Post-Disaster Journalism

This is but a brief overview of the range of significant issues reporters can pursue in the midst of the post-disaster recovery process. The key is to find out what opportunities communities face after a disaster — and yes, I did say opportunities — and whether and how well they have positioned themselves to take advantage of them. If you can describe for readers not only the pathos, but also the silver linings, you will create valuable context for understanding the road to a restorative future.

Next Issue: The opportunities disaster presents. Really.

Jim Schwab is the manager of the American Planning Association's Hazards Planning Research Center, and editor and co-author of its recent report, Hazard Mitigation: Integrating Best Practices into Planning." He wrote an article on recovery planning issues, "Winds of Change," for the October 2009 issue of APA's magazine, Planning. *He is also co-editor of APA's monthly* Zoning Practice.

Resource Box

A number of websites provide useful information on issues related to post-disaster recovery:

http://www.planning.org/nationalcenters/hazards/index.htm (APA's Hazards Planning Research Center, with links to past and current research.)

http://www.greensburgks.org/ (Official website of city of Greensburg, Kansas, detailing its recovery from a powerful 2007 tornado that devastated most of the community.)

http://www.fema.gov/library/viewRecord.do?id=1558 (FEMA resources on post-disaster recovery, in a 1998 document produced by APA, with Jim Schwab as primary author.)

http://www.dca.state.fl.us/fdcp/dcp/PDRP/index.cfm (Information on Florida's efforts to develop local post-disaster recovery plans.)

A surge of stories spews from

By BILL DAWSON

Along with a mammoth, months-long stream of oil, the disaster at BP's oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico unleashed a torrent of news coverage.

Even after the ruptured well was capped, plentiful follow-up coverage continued. The Beat would be remiss not to reflect a few facets of the kaleidoscopic variety of the reporting that accompanied an event widely called one of history's worst environmental catastrophes.

Here's an important up-front proviso: This column presents only a tiny sample of the journalistic outpouring during the weeks that the oil flowed from the crippled well and afterward. It aims to offer only a sense of the diversity of the Gulf coverage, with no claim to be comprehensive or representative.

There were, of course, key recurring themes that spanned the months of coverage of the big spill's recorded and possible environmental impacts. One such topic was the use of dispersant chemicals to break up the oil.

Just 10 days after the April 20 rig explosion that killed 11 workers and started the spill, the non-profit ProPublica's **Abrahm Lustgarten** presented an early examination of the issue, "Chemicals Meant To Break Up BP Oil Spill Present New Environmental Concerns."

[See the Inside Story interview with Lustgarten to learn more about ProPublica's extensive BP coverage page 12.]

Another early and detailed look at dispersants appeared in the *Orlando Sentinel* two days later. In "Oil-spill disaster: Chemicals used in cleanup add to toxic mix" **Kevin Spear** wrote:

Environmental advocates and scientists consider dispersant the lesser of two evils when faced with what could turn out to be the nation's worst drilling-related offshore oil spill. And the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency warns that "dispersants used today are less toxic than those used in the past, but long-term, cumulative effects of dispersant use are still unknown."

Attention to the subject was continuing at this writing, as illustrated by **Ben Raines**' Aug. 1 article in the *Mobile Press-Register*, "Some say effects of Deepwater Horizon spill will be felt for years to come."

Raines quoted one Louisiana State University chemist who believed dispersant had hastened bacterial breakdown of the spilled oil. A scientist at the University of Southern Mississippi believed dispersant use "had broken the oil down into small enough particles that it was able to work its way beneath the larval crabs' shells."

Meanwhile, **John McQuaid**, a former New Orleans *Times-Picayune* reporter, had an article on Aug. 9 in *Yale Environment 360*, "Past Disasters Offer Lessons on Legacy of Deepwater Spill." He wrote:

The toxicity of the dispersant BP has used, Corexit 9500, is hotly debated. [One toxicologist] says he believes the use of dispersants facilitated the release of toxic oil components — including benzene, a carcinogen, and toluene, which can cause neurological damage — that remain in the water.

Three days earlier, the debate's manifestation in Washington was reflected in a blog post by *The Hill*'s **Ben German**:

Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) is challenging test results that EPA is using to defend BP's spraying of large volumes of oil dispersing chemicals during the Gulf of Mexico spill.

For a number of outlets, blogs provided a frequently used medium for much spill coverage.

The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, was especially prolific in the spill-related posts on its Greenspace blog, written by several reporters.

Following a terse seven paragraphs about the spill on April 28 ("Oil slick may hit Louisiana coast by Friday, Coast Guard says," by **Geoff Mohan**), the blog had (by The Beat's perhaps imprecise estimate) between 300 and 400 posts on the subject.

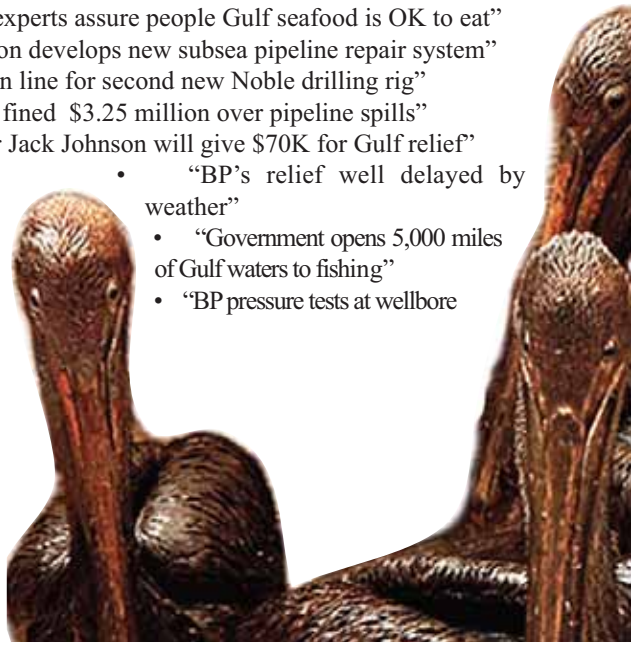
The 10 blog headlines from one day — April 30 — suggest the scope of the prolific effort that was mobilized by the *Times* soon afterward.

- "Latest NASA satellite photo"
- "Big Easy worried but busy"
- "NOAA map shows landfall projections"
- "President Obama will not be visiting the Gulf Coast this weekend"
- "The lawsuits are piling up"
- "Fishermen hope for hazmat jobs"
- "Officials warn BP to work harder"
- "The military moves in"
- "Choppy seas frustrate effort to contain oil spill"
- "The Halliburton connection"

Another highly productive blogger, the *Houston Chronicle*'s business writer **Tom Fowler**, was still cranking out numerous spill-connected posts for his NewsWatch Energy blog on Aug. 10.

Nine of his 11 posts between 6:45 a.m. and 5:35 p.m. that day bore headlines about the spill's aftermath or related industry developments:

- "Food experts assure people Gulf seafood is OK to eat"
- "Chevron develops new subsea pipeline repair system"
- "Shell in line for second new Noble drilling rig"
- "Plains fined $3.25 million over pipeline spills"
- "Singer Jack Johnson will give $70K for Gulf relief"
- "BP's relief well delayed by weather"
- "Government opens 5,000 miles of Gulf waters to fishing"
- "BP pressure tests at wellbore



n the darkness of the deep ocean BP oil leak

will help plan relief well intersect point"

• "Oil spill civil suits go to New Orleans, securities cases to Houston"

News coverage of the spill by daily newspapers in New Orleans and Houston — both energy-industry centers, both situated along the Gulf Coast — included work by some of their best-known journalists.

In the case of the *Times-Picayune*, they included two Pulitzer-winning staff members, **Mark Schleifstein** and **Bob Marshall**.

Schleifstein's long experience covering environmental issues in Louisiana was evident in the contextual detail he brought to numerous stories such as "Gulf oil spill only the latest environmental battle waged in Lake Pontchartrain," published July 6:

The 1,700 pounds of tar balls from the Gulf oil spill corralled in Lake Pontchartrain during the holiday weekend are just the latest in a long stream of environmental insults foisted on the 640-square-mile ecological gem bordering New Orleans.

Marshall, the *Times-Picayune*'s outdoors editor, has also been involved in various special projects on environmental issues, including the "Oceans of Trouble" series about the world's fisheries, co-written by Schleifstein and McQuaid, that won the Pulitzer Prize for public service in 1997.

One of Marshall's spill articles was published July 20, headlined "Louisiana blue crabs are tough, but Gulf oil spill might be tougher." An excerpt:

With their armored bodies and menacing pincers, Louisiana's blue crabs were shaped by nature to be tough guys in the highly competitive coastal marsh. But evolution hasn't prepared them for the test they'll face during the next two months: The species' peak spawning activities will take place where BP's oil is most prevalent — the coastal beaches and near-shore Gulf.

The *Chronicle*'s showcase project on the spill, "Voices of the Gulf," presented feature stories by staff columnists who were termed the newspaper's "best writers."

With the exception of an outdoors writer, these columnists don't normally cover environmental subjects, but focus on subjects such as professional sports and local and state government.

One "Voices of the Gulf" contributor, for example, was **Ken Hoffman**, who does a freewheeling pop-culture column as well as a syndicated column, "Drive-Thru Gourmet," in which he reviews fast-food restaurants' menu items.

His installment in the *Chronicle*'s spill series, datelined from Biloxi, Miss., was headlined "Biloxi quieted by spill anxiety," and had a lead that focused on an eatery that was empty when the writer visited:

Around this time last year, you had to wait 30 minutes for a table at Snapper's Seafood on Beach Boulevard. The owner had to assign a bartender around back to keep customers from giving up and going someplace else to eat.

I ordered the Seafood Platter — fried fish, shrimp, oysters and stuffed crab. The waiter asked, "Would you like that with tartar sauce, cocktail sauce or BP oil?"

continued on next page

At the Bird Rehabilitation Center in Fort Jackson, Louisiana, a bedraggled group of oiled brown pelicans huddles together as they await a bath. Over 600 rescued birds were washed and cared for at the center after a wave of oil hit the coastal wetlands in early June.

PHOTO BY CAROLYN COLE / *LOS ANGELES TIMES*

Anxiety — the condition that had "quieted" Biloxi, according to the *Chronicle* headline – was a topic that also appeared as the focus of other coverage of the spill's toll on Gulf Coast residents.

Some examples:

"Survey Finds Broad Anxiety Among Gulf Residents," by *The New York Times*' **Shaila Dewan** on Aug. 2:

Most [Gulf Coast residents in a Columbia University survey] do not think it is safe to eat local seafood.

More than a third report children with new rashes or breathing problems, or who are nervous, fearful or "very sad" since the spill began. And even though the gusher of oil has been stanched, almost a quarter of residents still fear that they will have to move.

"Expert sees big mental health effects from BP spill," by **Michael Peltier** for Reuters on June 29:

The mental health impacts of the BP oil spill will dwarf those encountered after the last major oil spill off U.S. shores, a sociologist who studied the Exxon Valdez spill told Florida volunteers on Tuesday.

"The Spill's Psychic Toll" by *Time*'s **Bryan Walsh** in the magazine's Aug. 9 edition:

Already there's a spike in demand for counseling, as well as increased reports of stress, excessive drinking and domestic violence. For a region that was still recovering from the serial traumas of hurricanes Katrina, Ike and Gustav, the spill couldn't have happened at a worse time.

"Depression, Abuse, Suicide: Fishermen's Wives Face Post-Spill Trauma," by **Mac McClelland** for *Mother Jones*' Web site on June 25:

Joycelyn Heintz, coordinator of the St. Bernard Project's Mental Health and Wellness Center, is bracing herself for the psychological damage this disaster is going to inflict both on her companions and on her client base. "Once we see the full impact," she says, "it's gonna be worse than Katrina."

Mother Jones identifies McClelland as its human rights reporter, and a few of the headlines from her blog posts suggest the range of her attention to some of the spill's social, economic and political aspects:

- "BP Fires 10,000 Cleanup Workers"
- "Is BP Making Louisiana Charities Beg?"
- "Mainstream Media Helps BP Pretend There's No Oil"
- "BP Cleanup Workers Gone Wild" (The magazine elaborated in a preview line: "Sex, race, and booze collide during a night of female oil wrestling on the Louisiana coast.")
- "Louisiana Tea Partiers Rally for More Drilling"
- "ICE Running Immigration Raids on Oil-Spill Workers"

McClelland was just one of a number of journalists reporting for *Mother Jones*, which, like ProPublica, is an investigative outlet that decided to jump on the big breaking-news story represented by the BP disaster.

The magazine, in a news release in July, cited the coverage decision as one key factor behind its "record-breaking [Web site] traffic and a significant increase in digital revenue during the second quarter of 2010."

The *Mother Jones* release elaborated:

"The BP oil-spill story needs to be covered by reporters who know the science, the landscape, and the politics. That's also how we approach our coverage of Beltway politics. It's the kind of journalism that Mother Jones *does best," said editor Clara Jeffery.*

Jeffery also pointed to *Mother Jones*' participation in the Climate Desk, a new journalistic collaboration that includes *The Atlantic*, the Center for Investigative Reporting, *Grist*, *Slate*, *Wired*, and WNET's Need to Know.

"Our readers respond to solid, informed reporting that breaks beyond the headlines, and that's what we aim to deliver day in and day out," Jeffery said.

PHOTO BY TED JACKSON / *THE TIMES-PICAYUNE*

In an effort to protect marsh lands from the approaching oil slick, a National Guard helicopter drops sand bags on a breach in the beach near Grand Isle, Louisiana.

On Aug. 9, the magazine announced that it was continuing its spill coverage in its September/October cover story:

In "The BP Cover-Up," Julia Whitty reports on new science that reveals the worst effects of the spill may be hidden in the darkness of the deep ocean. ... In "Bad Breakup," Mother Jones*' Washington-based environmental reporter Kate Sheppard details why BP isn't required to tell us, or even the government, exactly what the dispersants do.*

The spill spurred other investigative reporting, which often provided background and context on operations by BP, regulators and/or others in the oil and gas industry.

A few examples:

"Renegade Refiner: OSHA Says BP Has 'Systemic Safety Problem,'" by **Jim Morris** and **M.B. Pell** of the non-profit Center for Public Integrity on May 16:

Two refineries owned by oil giant BP account for 97 percent of all flagrant violations found in the refining industry by government safety inspectors over the past three years, a Center for Public Integrity analysis shows.

"BP Decisions Set Stage for Disaster," by **Ben Casselman** and **Russell Gold** of *The Wall Street Journal* on May 27:

A Wall Street Journal *investigation provides the most complete account so far of the fateful decisions that preceded the blast. BP made choices over the course of the project that rendered this well more vulnerable to the blowout, which unleashed a spew of crude oil that engineers are struggling to stanch.*

continued on page 21

Gulf oil leak shrouds climate change but still holds key lessons

By BUD WARD

Picture a lone and seemingly forlorn polar bear adrift on an ice floe. It represents the end of an entire species. But it's no match, it turns out, for some heavily soiled brown pelicans. Particularly if the latter is the state bird.

Or think of it this way: A daily counting of "Day 54, Day 55, Day 56,…Day 96…." — sort of the opposite of the Bulletin of American Scientists' iconic Doomsday Clock counting downward — may have a lot more resonance with the broad public than a global warming clock ticking by necessity in increments of years, decades, and centuries.

Not to be flip, but the relentless spewing forth of what ends up being billions of gallons of oil a mile down in the Gulf of Mexico has it all over, from a public relations standpoint, the most gripping images of a warming world.

The Gulf oil leak has an easily caricatured villain or bad guy, BP ... and Tony Hayward, he of "I'd like to have my life back" infamy. Global warming's bad guy is you and me and our every-day humdrum high-carbon existence.

Game, set, and match. Case closed, hands-down. No wonder that an American public so rightly consumed and piqued by the Gulf disaster sometimes appears like it could care less about a hotter world down the road.

For journalists intent on covering major energy- and environment-related stories and natural disasters, the BP Gulf of Mexico oil leak, with 24/7 images of gushing hydrocarbons a mile deep, easily supplanted climate change and virtually all other national stories in the nation's steadily shrinking print and broadcast news hole. That's not so much a criticism as a fact, and the focus may indeed be understandable and entirely appropriate.

What as recently as a year ago had been widely assumed to be the defining news story of the century — both by many journalists and by policy makers alike — climate change ends up, for now at least, appearing little more than an afterthought: neither the story of the week, of the month, of the unusually hot summer season, or of what appears likely to end up being among the planet's hottest-on-record calendar years.

There are of course striking parallels and profound differences between the sudden and in-your-face Gulf BP spill and the incremental and nonlinear climate change issue. Each on its own has plenty of lessons-learned to offer the news media for years, even decades, to come:

- SEJers who have tilled these fertile news fields for any length of time are well aware that it's not just what you can see, touch, and smell "up close and personal," as a thoroughly disgusting ad campaign puts it. It's also the devil you don't and can't know — the hidden risks, the infinitesimal concentrations, the perils lurking under the sea and not solely those floating on top of it for all to see.

This is virtually certain to be the case also with the BP disaster. Just as there were assertions from the start that the dangers and risks might last for decades or eons, there are certain to be those seeing no residual risks at all once the most visible sheen, tar balls, and utter goo no longer qualify for "Live at 5."

- Proponents of climate action early on felt they might succeed in turning the Gulf fiasco to their political advantage. Just contrast the oily image of "the old energy" against the glittering promise of a green economy, their logic flowed. But with the BP disaster virtually deep-sixing any Capitol Hill political compromise spanning deep-water drilling and nuclear power interests, just the opposite happened.

The Gulf oil leak cemented no strong national consensus on an aggressive new low-carbon energy future, but rather offered another reason to put off the actions likely needed to tame our oil dependency and put the reins on runaway warming.

- Early estimates of volumes of oil leaked, whether by gallons or barrels, appeared no better in hindsight than early estimates of ecological damages inflicted. Both, in fact, were estimates and needed to be treated (and questioned) by media as such. That's likely going to remain the case for some time in the future, and time and time alone may shed definitive light on how much damage occurs, how much is "serious," and how much remains irreversible.

Media can count on one thing for sure here: Blowhards and bloviators on the extremes will over-and understate their forecasts to fit their own agendas. Reporters should do their best to parse out the evidentiary basis for those estimates and the error ranges…and be snookered neither way. SEJ's upcoming Montana annual conference and other articles in this *SEJournal* surely can shed constructive light on these issues.

On one's deathbed, they say, it is common to revisit life's monumental passages. Not just those of the personal sort — the birth of one's children, the passing of one's parents, the union with one's someone special, but also those of a more collective and societal nature. For those of us of a certain age, it's likely such a list could consist of things like the assassinations of John F. and Robert F. Kennedy and of Martin Luther King, Jr.; the "long hot summer" of 1968; the 9/11 attacks on our country; the Tet Offensive or perhaps Hamburger Hill or the My Lai "incident" or Kent State.

Add now Katrina and the BP Gulf nightmare to those key societal passages that some of us will take to our graves. The Gulf leak is likely to be a BC/AD experience for many of the reporters most serious about their responsibilities for covering our nation's energy and environmental challenges. How they learn from the experience might just have a major impact on how our fellow citizens respond to the next set of comparable challenges.

For those, it's regrettably a matter of when and where and not whether. And they'll again need outstanding independent journalism to help see through the fog of confusion, over-and understatement, and partisan posturing.

Bud Ward is an independent journalism educator and founder/former editor of Environment Writer. *He now is editor of the* Yale Forum on Climate Change & the Media.

PHOTO: COURTESY OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

The invasion of predatory lionfish in the Caribbean region poses yet another major threat there to coral reef ecosystems.

The new invader, lionfish, raises major concerns for ocean reef systems

By RAE TYSON

Arguably, the gypsy moth and kudzu vine are among the nation's most notorious invasive species. But it was the 1988 introduction of the zebra mussel into the Great Lakes ecosystem that heightened the vulnerability of United States' waterways.

Now, a relatively new invader — the Indo-Pacific lionfish — has raised scientific concerns about the vulnerability of the nation's oceans.

"Lionfish could alter the structure of native reef fish communities," said the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). "Additional effects of the lionfish invasion are far-reaching and could increase coral reef ecosystem stress, threaten human health, and ultimately impact the marine aquarium industry."

The lionfish belongs to the venomous scorpionfish family and is native to the tropical Indian Ocean and western and central Pacific. Because of their spiny, colorful appearance, they have long been a home aquarium favorite. But, because of their toxic spines, lionfish predictably have few natural predators in a non-native environment.

Scientists aren't sure exactly when they were introduced to U.S. waterways. Popular myth has it that the lionfish was introduced to the south Atlantic in 1992 when Hurricane Andrew unleashed its fury on the Florida coast. Speculation is that the contents of a home aquarium ended up in the waters of Biscayne Bay, which is adjacent to Miami. But divers first documented the presence of the venomous species off Dania, Fla., just north of Miami, in October 1985, some seven years earlier.

Now, the prolific species, its eggs carried by fast-moving currents, has been spotted as far north as Rhode Island and as far south as the Caribbean Sea. Lionfish aren't expected to migrate further north because they have a penchant for warmer waters.

Lionfish reach sexual maturity within two years and reproduce multiple times during the spawning season, according to NOAA researchers. Up to 30,000 eggs can be produced with each spawn.

Scientists predict that the lionfish will soon make its way into the Gulf of Mexico. In June of 2010, a local fisherman caught a lionfish in his net off the coast of the island of Saint Kitts in the Caribbean.

The voracious lionfish has become the leading worry for those who are trying to protect coral-dwelling aquatic species. NOAA found that lionfish are consuming the majority of forage fish available on some reefs, thus crowding out native specimens.

"Consider this as biological warfare on the fisheries of the Virgin Islands," said Shannon Gore, marine biologist with the Virgin Islands Conservation and Fisheries Department.

Adult lionfish have big appetites. They chomp down more than 40 fish species along with crustaceans such as shrimp, crabs and mollusks.

"We are looking at a gluttonous feeder that is eating almost everything that fits in its mouth, including ecologically, economically and recreationally important marine species," Laddie Akins of Florida's Reef Environmental Education Foundation tells

SEJournal. The impact of lionfish on some species — notably grouper and snapper — is already significant, scientists say.

To control the spread of this invasive species, NOAA has recommended a three-pronged approach, including population control, outreach and education, and research.

"We are currently considering early detection and rapid response efforts to keep lionfish out of the sanctuaries," said ecologist James Morris, NOAA National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science. "It is unclear at this time if these attempts will be successful."

Some areas are independently taking steps to limit the growth of the invader. In the Bahamas and Florida, several communities are holding annual lionfish derbies. In Florida, divers are asked to capture the lionfish and are provided instructions on how to catch the fish without gouging themselves on the venomous spines.

Well-known Washington, D.C., chef Barton Seaver has another idea — eating them. Recently, he served a meal of lionfish at an event designed to call attention to overfishing in the Atlantic.

"Snacking on red lionfish might help the coral ecosystems along the southern Atlantic coast, where the invasive species (with no known predator) has been wreaking havoc with fish and humans alike," said a *Washington City Paper* food blog.

Said Akins: "This is about as green as you can get as far as a fish to eat."

All told, over 60 invasive species have been identified in the southern Atlantic and Caribbean oceans. But the prolific lionfish has the potential to have the most significant impact on ecosystems throughout the region.

"The future expansion of lionfish into the coastal waters of the southern Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, and eastern South America is probable and troublesome," NOAA predicts.

Rae Tyson is a veteran journalist and co-founder of SEJ. Currently on the staff of Environmental Health News, Tyson lives in an old farmhouse near Gettysburg, Pa., which, incidentally, is a long way from the nearest lionfish infestation.

Bibliography:

December 2009: NOAA's National Ocean Service: "Biology, Ecology, Control and Management of the Invasive Indo-Pacific Lionfish: An Updated Integrated Assessment"

September 2008: "Invasive Indo-Pacific lionfish *Pterois volitans* Reduce Recruitment of Atlantic Coral-reef Fishes"; Department of Zoology, Oregon State University.

Sources:

U.S. Geological Survey Invasive Species Fact Sheet: http://nas.er.usgs.gov/queries/FactSheet.aspx?speciesID=963

NOAA National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science lionfish webpage: http://coastalscience.noaa.gov/education/lionfish/welcome.html

NOAA National Ocean Service lionfish educational website: http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/education/stories/lionfish

Reef Environmental Education Foundation: www.reef.org

Contacts:

Laddie Akins, director of operations; REEF; Key Largo, Fla., (305) 852-0030

James A. Morris, ecologist, Center for Coastal Fisheries and Habitat Research, NOAA, Beuford, N.C., (252) 728-8782

The Beat
continued from page 18

"Regulators Failed to Address Risks in Oil Rig Fail-Safe Device," **David Barstow**, **Laura Dodd**, **James Glanz**, **Stephanie Saul** and **Ian Urbina** of *The New York Times* on June 20:

An examination by The New York Times *highlights the chasm between the oil industry's assertions about the reliability of its blowout preventers and a more complex reality. It reveals that the federal agency charged with regulating offshore drilling, the Minerals Management Service, repeatedly declined to act on advice from its own experts on how it could minimize the risk of a blind shear ram [a crucial safety device] failure.*

"Gulf awash in 27,000 abandoned wells," by **Jeff Donn** and **Mitch Weiss** of the Associated Press:

More than 27,000 abandoned oil and gas wells lurk in the hard rock beneath the Gulf of Mexico, an environmental minefield that has been ignored for decades. No one — not industry, not government — is checking to see if they are leaking, an Associated Press investigation shows.

"BP collecting millions in government stimulus funds for California power plant," by **Will Evans** of the non-profit Center for Investigative Reporting's California Watch:

The federal government is giving a joint venture involving oil giant BP millions of dollars in stimulus money to build a power plant on farmland near the tiny Kern County town of Tupman, even as the company faces heavy government pressure and a criminal probe into the Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

In Louisiana, an important, state-level aspect of the BP story (with obvious national ramifications) was the locally popular proposal seeking federal approval to build offshore sand berms to protect the state's vital marshes from incoming oil.

There were also local misgivings about the wisdom of the plan, however, which were duly reflected in *The* (Baton Rouge) *Advocate*.

Strongly promoted by Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, the berm idea had detractors among scientists, including members of an expert review team set up after a permit application was filed with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The Advocate noted such concerns in an editorial, "Sand berms questioned," on June 14:

We believe the urgency of the emergency made the appeal of the sand berms irresistible to Jindal and to local officials wanting to block some specific areas from oil intrusion. ...

But we hope this project is watched closely and vetted carefully by science and not just the political appeal of do-something, do-anything.

In a subsequent news story headlined "Sand berms partially political," *The Advocate*'s **Amy Wold** reported on July 11 that while "very little was heard from the science community in Louisiana" when the berm proposal was introduced, members of the review team had "told state officials that in their opinion, the risks outweighed the benefits."

One scientist told Wold that "politicians and others" had "vilified scientists as being obstructionists" for voicing their concerns that the berms could do more harm than good.

Bill Dawson is assistant editor of the SEJournal. *He can be contacted at b.dawson@earthlink.net.*

Try a little carp humor to woo more traffic to your online news site

By DAVID POULSON

Our Great Lakes Echo environmental news service once ran an image of a giant Asian carp plucking an unsuspecting toddler from a Lake Michigan beach. http://tinyurl.com/2dyu7lc

Another time we featured Sarah Palin shooting a carp with an automatic weapon. http://tinyurl.com/2bwg997

We also showcased a giant carp floating above Chicago like the Goodyear blimp. http://tinyurl.com/2ezyelg And we revealed the presence of two of the fish in the chambers of the U.S. Supreme Court. http://tinyurl.com/yf6ulx4

These reader-manipulated images grew out of our desire to build the greater engagement that all online news sites crave.

The verdict: Humor works.

Engaging readers is what journalism is all about. You can't use the wisdom of the crowds if the crowd isn't there. So when you build it and they don't come, what do you do?

Try poking your readers with a sharp stick and challenging them to interact.

Some may wonder: Is this journalism? At a minimum, features like carp bombs serve the same function as crossword puzzles and comic strips. They bring people into your news community.

But they are more than marketing. They give readers motivation to become aware of the issues you explore in a more serious vein. And if they're not — we link to the serious stories.

But it's a bit like the Daily Show — you need to bring to it an awareness of the news to appreciate Jon Stewart's jokes.

PHOTO: BY OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVES / GORDON VIA FLICKR /

CARPet bombing

Otherwise you'll never understand why those carp are peering over the shoulders of the Supreme Court justices.

Be warned that reader engagement is not an exact science. Sometimes nothing happens when we throw community engagement efforts against the Echo wall. We've asked readers to submit links to stories elsewhere to help with our aggregation efforts. Rarely do we get one.

And when something works, we're not sure why.

Don't get discouraged when your best ideas flop. You'll be surprised by something else that works. More surprising — and puzzling — is when a failed idea works the second time.

Here are some ideas to spur interaction with environmental news that we use at Great Lakes Echo:

Photo fun

Asian carp are hardly sharp sticks. But we used them to stir up engagement. Armed with a voracious appetite, these critters are knocking on the door of the Great Lakes with the potential to devastate the ecosystem that Echo covers. All that's keeping them out of Lake Michigan is an electric barrier at Chicago. And they may have breached that.

After weeks of carp crisis coverage http://tinyurl.com/28mgecc and reports on posturing politicians, we invited readers http://tinyurl.com/ykg66uc to submit to our Flickr account images of carp inserted into unusual scenes http://tinyurl.com/2795vez . We even provided carp images for raw materials.

When the entries rolled in, we dropped one "carp bomb" a week onto Echo's front page. But they also escaped into other media. One newspaper columnist ran our carp bombs in two of his columns.

Another gave us a picture of her downtown and asked us to insert a carp image into it. We ran it on Echo http://tinyurl.com/285ojo4 and she ran it in her paper with a story about the threat. We were happy to oblige. We were happier to gain the exposure.

To extend the feature's run, we compiled a dozen carp bombs into a gallery linked off our homepage http://tinyurl.com/2dfn7z8

So while carp are terrible for our ecosystem, they've been good for us. Chances are your community has the equivalent of our carp — another invasive species or some other ecological terror to poke fun at. Everyone likes to tell a joke. Give them the tools and the encouragement to do so. To ease the technical barrier, offer to do the photoshop work if readers provide the images and the cutlines. Encourage them to share their efforts.

Play on your community's insecurities

You know those annoying national media stories that highlight the top 10 "Best of Something" lists? Best bike trails. Greenest roofs. Most energy efficient buildings. How often does your community get mentioned in those?

So play up that omission. Challenge readers to set the record straight with local nominations.

When editors of *Outside* Magazine listed only one park in any of the eight Great Lakes states as among their favorites, we asked readers to tell us which ones from our region should have been listed.

Write a quiz

People complain about those Facebook quizzes that promise to determine such things as which television character is most similar to their personality. Yet they still take them.

These quizzes give you two shots at engagement. First, ask readers for help building one. Then ask them to take it.

Our first Echo quiz asked, "Which Great Lake are you?" Readers noted that the personality of Lake Superior was cool and inaccessible and, well, superior. And if your favorite beverage was Labatt Blue, your personality may be better suited to Lake Ontario. That was fun, but it didn't scream take me!

So we built another quiz around the question, "Which Great Lakes invasive species is your former significant other?" Readers sent some telling observations of an ex who left their home a mess, spread disease and had the bug eyes of a round goby (that's a fish). Some noted that the purple loosestrife plant is beautiful but expensive to remove, that house sparrows kill other birds and their young and take over their nests and that spotted knapweed is a loner with a toxic personality.

My favorite comment during this quiz-building phase: "My ex is definitely an Asian carp. He is huge, gross-looking and he frequently pops up when I least expect him to. I wish there was an electric fence to keep him away from Michigan."

Make a map

Marrying data to geography is a quick addition to a news story and often can stand with little additional text. It is particularly helpful on the environmental beat when the sense of place is so critical to the story. Check out the tutorials at google maps. http://tinyurl.com/28lc7kg

You can also invite readers to contribute suggestions for map points.

One of our most trafficked stories is about Great Lakes inspired music and bands http://tinyurl.com/yj33we4 . An accompanying map pinpoints the Great Lakes connection. The points link to information about the band or song. Readers quickly made contributions. Each week we feature Monday Mashup, a map relevant to our region that we've created or found http://tinyurl.com/2c3hsf9 Our hope was that readers would also contribute maps, easing the reporting burden. They haven't and I'm puzzled. Maybe we just haven't found the map nerd crowd yet. I still have hopes of engaging them. Maps are a great way to tell an environmental story.

Your physical community likely has a planning agency with mapmakers whose work may not get much attention. Rather then burying these efforts on their hard drives, they may be glad for a public platform. Invite them to contribute. Chances are if it's an issue important enough for bureaucrats to map, you should be reporting it in some manner.

Cover the environment from space

Unusual ways of reporting news engage new readers. When we animated a month's worth of still satellite images for a story about spring runoff on Lake Erie http://tinyurl.com/2dehfoy, our daily hits more than doubled.

We tapped into a community of satellite nerds. To them, our use of images taken from space was at least as interesting as what they showed. One sharp-eyed reader even noticed that we had deleted images from certain days. We had to explain those were days with heavy cloud cover, but that was an opportunity for us to demonstrate our responsiveness to engagement.

People revisited that story for months. With any luck, some stayed for the other content.

And we hope to revisit that story later this summer with satellite imagery showing algae blooms fed by the spring runoff shown in the earlier report. NASA's Earth Observatory at http://tinyurl.com/z32f is a good place to poke around for images, but local universities may be snagging images of your region and help you find appropriate ones.

Insert a poll

Using a third-party polling service like Polldaddy http://polldaddy.com/ gives you a low-effort interactive feature that can run with a story http://tinyurl.com/236cldt , multiple stories or as a standing feature. It is a cheap way for readers to weigh in, although we find many comments are gripes about the unscientific nature of Internet polls. We never say the results support the facts of a news story. But we appreciate the engagement.

Ask for help

Reporters have used our staff blog, Catch of the Day http://tinyurl.com/2f2jtro , to seek sources, information and story angles. Later this summer we hope to take that concept a step further with another group's documentary while it's under production. Each week we will run excerpts of the footage the producers have shot. It won't be a story, but rather the disjointed building blocks of what will become a story. Our hope is that readers will suggest other people to interview or new angles to pursue. It may build interest in the final product and perhaps reach people who will not otherwise see it.

You could do this with any meaty issue that you commit to over time. And it wouldn't have to be a video. Put up an incomplete story and ask readers to tell you where to fill in the blanks.

Track your impact

Be aware that community engagement flares up in unexpected places and not necessarily where you are hoping — your own site.

Unknown to us, a mountain biking group once fed our RSS feed of recreation stories into its own forum. When a story broke about the threatened closure of a park popular among the biking crowd, the forum erupted with comments, links and stories.

A community of angry mountain bikers grew up around the threat. It's exactly the kind of thing you want to happen — except on your turf.

We post links to our stories on a statewide listserv primarily used by environmental activists. Sometimes discussion of those stories erupts there instead of on our site.

That's just a reality of online news. You may initiate it, but the community decides where it will happen. It's frustrating when your efforts produce community elsewhere.

Yet it's important activity to track as you justify your impact to funders.

Great Lakes Echo Editor David Poulson is the associate director of Michigan State University's Knight Center for Environmental Journalism. A version of this article was first written for J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism and appears on the Knight Citizen News Network at http://www.kcnn.org/index.php/engage

SEJ awarded prestigious international prize

PHOTO COURTESY CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION

President of the Jury of the Calouste Gulbenkian International Prize, Jorge Sampaio (left), and President of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Emilio Rui Vilar (middle), present SEJ Executive Director Beth Parke with the prize trophy which depicts the foundation headquarters in Lisbon.

The Society of Environmental Journalists has won international recognition as it was honored in July as co-winner of the esteemed Gulbenkian Prize.

Awarded by the Gulbenkian International Peace Prize Society in Lisbon, Portugal, the prize distinguishes an individual or institution "whose thoughts or actions make a decisive contribution to and have significant impact on understanding, defending or fostering the universal values of the human condition."

SEJ shared the prize with the Institute for Alpine Environment, a scientific research center of the European Academy of Bozen/Bolzano.

SEJ's recognition was awarded with reference to the category of "humanity's relationship with nature and respect for biodiversity."

Winners were honored at a ceremony in Lisbon, Portugal on July 20, 2010 where the prize of €100,000 was shared equally by the two winners.

SEJ Executive Director Beth Parke traveled to Lisbon to accept the prize.

"I accept this most prestigious award on behalf of thousands of dedicated journalists who work every day to investigate, explain and report on environmental issues, in all of their complexity and importance," she said.

"Environmental journalists share with environmental scientists this concern and quest for the truth about life and living systems on this planet, and humanity's place in it," Parke continued.

Parke noted the many people who deserve credit in SEJ's success, including Programs Director Chris Rigel, other staff, current and past board members and the institutions, scientists and educators who have supported the group's efforts.

Parke later acknowledged longtime staffer Jay Letto, SEJ's conference director, as deserving of special accolades.

Letto has devoted his career to bringing scientists and journalists together, Parke said.

"He's helped SEJers to explore and understand ecosystems and endangered habitat, put a spotlight on people like E.O. Wilson and Aldo Leopold, even made it possible for SEJ to visit Leopold's legendary "Shack," and the storage room in St. Louis where they keep the botanical samples gathered by Charles Darwin," Parke said. "This prize has Letto fingerprints all over it."

Christy George, SEJ's president, said, "It's an extraordinary honor for SEJ's work in educating and supporting environmental journalism to be recognized internationally, especially at this time of crisis for both journalism and the environment."

Jurors for this year's Gulbenkian International Prize were Jorge Sampaio, Lord Robert May, Jacqueline McGlade, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber and Viriato Soromenho-Marques.

A Gulbenkian Prize spokesperson said jurors decided to recognize both organizations "to highlight the importance of applied research to environmental and biodiversity protection," as well as the work of environmental journalism "and its contribution to creating an informed and enlightened public opinion."

The Foundation praised SEJ for giving journalists of varied backgrounds and experience "a high degree of understanding of multifaceted environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and increasing pressure on essential water resources." SEJ was also recognized for its awareness and fulfillment of the journalistic responsibility to produce "diverse, independent and accurate narratives, in areas characterized by conflicting interests as well as technical and scientific complexity."

Based in Lisbon, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is a Portuguese private institution of public utility whose statutory aims are in the fields of arts, charity, education and science. Created by a clause in the will of Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian, the Foundation's statutes were approved in 1956. The large Foundation premises in Lisbon, opened in 1969, comprise the Foundation's head office and the museum. For more information about the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation see www.gulbenkian.pt.

SEJ's 2010 award winners for reporting on the environment

The Society of Environmental Journalists' winners of the 2009-2010 Awards for Reporting on the Environment will be honored Oct. 13 at a gala in the University Center, University of Montana, Missoula, on the first day of SEJ's 20th annual conference.

SEJ's journalism contest is the world's largest and most comprehensive awards for journalism on environmental topics.

Twenty-nine entries in 11 categories were selected by a panel of distinguished judges, with two honorable mentions. The panel of reporters, editors and journalism educators pored over 216 entries to choose the finalists representing the best environmental reporting in print and on television, radio, the Internet and in student publications.

SEJ's Rachel Carson Environment Book Award winner receives $1,000 and a pair of marble bookends bearing the contest, book and author information. The student winner receives $250, a crystal trophy and up to $750 in travel assistance to the annual conference. Each of the other winning entries receives $1,000 and a crystal trophy.

Here's a list of the winners with some of the judges' comments:

Outstanding Explanatory Reporting, Print

First Place: Agent Orange: A Lethal Legacy, *Chicago Tribune*
Jason Grotto, Tim Jones, Kuni Takahashi, Chris Walker
The *Chicago Tribune*'s five-part series on Agent Orange's lethal legacy explains in heart-wrenching detail how the weapons of war can keep on maiming and killing decades after hostilities end.

Second Place: Climate Change, The Associated Press
Charles J. Hanley and Seth Borenstein
Third Place: The Writing on the Wall, *Los Angeles Times*, Julie Cart

Kevin Carmody Award for Outstanding Investigative Reporting, Print

First Place: Toxic Waters, *The New York Times*
Charles Duhigg
Charles Duhigg's groundbreaking and impactful look at America's drinking water is the unanimous choice among judges for the Carmody investigative print award. The length, scope, and revelations contained in the Toxic Waters investigation made an impressive contribution to the public debate on water use in the U.S.

Second Place: Natural Gas Drilling: A Threat to Water?, ProPublica
Abrahm Lustgarten, Joaquin Sapien, Sabrina Shankman
Third Place: Who's Watching the Farm?, *Wisconsin State Journal*, Ron Seely

Outstanding Beat Reporting, Print

First Place: *The Seattle Times*, Craig Allen Welch
Welch solidly reported on a wide range of topics, from the demise of local shellfish industries to conflict between wolves and ranchers, and deteriorating levees, with superb writing. Welch used a wide variety of voices to tell compelling local stories that tie into larger regional or global issues.

Second Place: The Last Jaguar, *Arizona Daily Star*, Anthony J. Davis and Tim Steller
Third Place: Green China, *The New York Times*, Keith Bradsher

Outstanding Online Reporting

First Place: The Last Untamed River, Radio Free Asia, Minh-Ha Le
A memorable project that vividly depicted the dimensions of an environmental issue unfamiliar to many people. This visual voyage down the Mekong River from its source to its mouth brought to life a river ecosystem — make that ecosystems — of enormous complexity.

Second Place: A Visit to the Farallon Islands, KQED Quest, Lauren Sommer, Andrea Kissack, Craig Rosa, Paul Rogers

SEJ's Rachel Carson Environment Book Award

First Place: *Heart of Dryness: How the Last Bushmen Can Help Us Endure the Coming Age of Permanent Drought*, Walker & Co, James G. Workman
Judges were impressed by this book's originality and ambitious approach. *Heart of Dryness* explains the global water crisis through the eyes of the Bushmen of Botswana, a group of persecuted people who have learned to survive in the Kalahari Desert and its longstanding drought.

Second Place: *Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What To Do About It*, Island Press, Robert Glennon
Third Place: *Paving Paradise: Florida's Vanishing Wetlands and the Failure of No Net Loss*, University Press of Florida, Craig Pittman and Matthew Waite

Outstanding Beat/In-Depth Reporting, Radio

First Place: Architects Share Green Building Ideas, PRI's The World
Jason Margolis
This piece stood head and shoulders above the competition for the reporter's skill in taking a simple and increasingly familiar concept — greenhouse gas emissions — and helping the listener understand it in terms of the spaces so many of us inhabit during our workdays …The content was surprising, revealing and compelling, and the manner in which it was conveyed to the listener was masterful.

Second Place: Coal: Dirty Past, Hazy Future, Michigan Public Radio and The Environment Report,
Mark Brush, Shawn Allee, Lester Graham, Rebecca M. Williams, Erika Celeste, Sandra Sleight-Brennan, Julie Edelson Halpert, Matt Shafer Powell
Third Place: On Their Own Terms, PRI's Living on Earth, Ingrid Lobet

Outstanding Student Reporting

FIRST PLACE: Powering a Nation: The Coal Story, Sara Peach, Jenn Hueting, Monica Ulmanu, Chris Carmichael (University of North Carolina)
Environmentalists argue that removing Appalachian mountaintops to mine coal is a disaster. For many who live in that hardscrabble area, it seems an economic necessity. Sara Peach and her student team from the University of North Carolina captured that basic division, and its many nuances, in a well-constructed series of interviews and images presented in a style that's dispassionate and non-judgmental and, largely because of that, makes clear how wrenching this issue is.

Honorable Mention: University of Montana Grace Case Project, Laura Lundquist (with a team of 31 students and three professors)
Honorable Mention: Trouble in Rossmoor: The Woodpecker Chronicles, *Bay Nature Magazine*,
Daniel McGlynn

Outstanding Beat/In-Depth Reporting, Television

First Place: Climate Change Winners and Losers
CBS Evening News and CBS Sunday Morning
Ben Plesser and Mark Phillips
The judges were unanimous in awarding first prize in the "BEAT/IN-DEPTH TV" category to "Climate Change Winners and Losers." This two-part report was a superb example of what television does best: taking us to places and showing us what is happening with strong, clear images. There was obviously a lot of research that went into this story about the extreme edges of what's happening with climate change, but it didn't get in the way of the storytelling. The writing was crisp, precise and witty. The reporter's on-camera appearances were dramatic and engaging, from riding in the dog sled in Greenland to snorkelling in the Maldives and demonstrating by walking in the water what the consequences of rising sea levels could be.

Second Place: Quest: National Parks Special: Bringing the Parks to the People, KQED Quest, San Francisco, CA,
Christopher Bauer, Jenny Oh, Sheraz Sadiq, Amy Miller, Gail Huddleson, Paul Rogers
Third Place: Transit Development vs. Open Space/Ancient Site, KSL-TV, Salt Lake City, UT,
John Daley

Outstanding Small Market Reporting, Print

First Place: Green vs. Green: Environmentalists Duke It Out
Monterey County Weekly
Kera Abraham
By examining conflicts in which both sides laid plausible claim to being champions of the environment, Abraham offered an unusually sophisticated and thought-provoking examination of what it means to be green. Her pieces were thoroughly reported, engagingly told, fresh and fair-minded.

Second Place: A Quiet Hell, *Houston Press*, Chris Vogel
Third Place: Soup-to-Nuts: Small Market Reporting, *Earth Island Journal*
Jason Mark

Outstanding Story, Television, Small Market

First Place: Poison Water
WHIO-TV, Dayton, OH
Kathryn Burcham
The judges were impressed with the reporter's research and development of this strong, local story. She and her station demonstrated a commitment to a subject that other media outlets may have been tempted to overlook. Her tenacity is evident by the positive results that were achieved for the residents of Garden City. This story is not available electronically.

Second Place: The Air We Breathe, WTAE-TV, Pittsburgh, PA
Jim Parsons, Michael Lazorko, Kendall Cross

Outstanding Story, Television, Large Market

First Place: Seahorse Sleuths
KQED Quest, San Francisco, CA
Joan Johnson, Jenny Oh, Shirley Gutierrez, Kenji Yamamoto, Josh Rosen, Paul Rogers
A compelling piece about a strange and fascinating creature jeopardized by the global trade in dried seahorses. Beautiful images, combined with solid editing, made this entry stand out, as did the documenting of efforts by scientists and advocates to save the seahorse. This story was made exceptional by the power of great underwater video as well as undercover video from inside the markets where a startling number of seahorses are sold.

Second Place: Borneo: Human and Environmental Health, PBS NewsHour,
Fred de Sam Lazaro, Nicole See, Tom Adair, Skip Davis
Third Place: Algae Power, KQED Quest,
San Francisco, CA,
Gabriela Quirós, Josh Rosen, Jenny Oh, Linda Peckham, Gail Huddleson, Amy Miller, Paul Rogers.

New blogs, awards and prize-winning books

By JUDY FAHYS

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill provided SEJ's members with infinite opportunities to investigate, explore and elucidate one of the most devastating environmental catastrophes of our time.

Among the innovations arising from the spill: SEJ's **Joe Davis** and a small team of enablers launched a blog dedicated to news about the blowout and information sources to help environmental writers cover it: http://dailyglob.sej.org/ . SEJ has taken this orphan under its wing, and now some funders may want to support it.

Right now, Joe is doing this in his garage (figuratively) in his spare time. With luck, he hopes to expand it soon to a new platform, bring in lots of citizen journalists, and transform the news media.

"Stay tuned," Davis says. "This story ain't going away soon."

SEJ members reported many new honors and enterprises that spanned the most remote reaches of Earth to its busiest cities.

Heather Dewar is editing a new weekly zine for *Urbanite* magazine focusing on urban ecology — the science and the social movement. The zine, which launched July 5, focuses on Baltimore but will include some national stories. She would like to hear from other SEJ members covering urban ecology: hdewar@earthlink.net.

Rae Tyson, SEJ founding vice president, has joined the staff of Environmental Health News. The move reunites Tyson with former SEJ board member **Marla Cone**, editor-in-chief of EHN.

Michael Casey has moved to Dubai, United Arab Emirates to become the Gulf correspondent for The Associated Press. He'll cover sports, news and environment across the Middle East. Previously, he was the AP's regional environment correspondent for Asia based in Bangkok, Thailand. He served earlier as an AP correspondent in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Gustave Axelson recently learned that his story about northern goshawks in Minnesota, "The Alpha Accipiter", (http://tinyurl.com/2acohlw) is one of 100 selected for Houghton Mifflin's "The Best American Science & Nature Writing 2010".

Axelson noted that it's a coup for the donation-funded *Minnesota Conservation* magazine to make the cut, since pieces from big-name publications typically dominate the anthology. He also had a tip for anyone who might hazard into this raptor's turf. "Yes, goshawks really do attack when you step into their nesting territory," said Axelson. "Next time (if there is one), I'm wearing a bike helmet."

Magazine editor and freelancer **Craig Saunders** began a new gig teaching a new course in conventional and on-screen proofreading at Ryerson University in Toronto. Last year, he created the first course of its kind in Canada, at George Brown College.

Dan Sullivan was recently named managing editor of *BioCycle* magazine. The publication — whose tagline is "Advancing composting, organics recycling and renewable energy" is in its 51st year and is based in Emmaus, PA. Formerly with the Rodale Institute's webzine www.NewFarm.org, where he was senior editor, and Rodale Inc.'s *Organic Gardening* magazine, he graduated May 15 with a master's degree in environmental studies (MSES) from Green Mountain College in Poultney, Vermont, where SEJ member environmental communications professor **Ron Steffens** was his thesis advisor.

Freelance writer and editor **Erica Gies** was the Vermont Law School energy fellow for the summer session.

Emily Gertz has been selected as a 2010 Ocean Science Journalism Fellow at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. She'll attend the formal program from September 12-18, and may stay for the optional second week to do some independent reporting.

Adrianne Appel has been awarded a Knight Science Journalism Fellowship at MIT for the 2010-2011 academic year. Her egghead gene will be fully expressed, as she studies environmental and health topics.

Canadian author **Alanna Mitchell** was the first book author to win the Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment for her book *Sea Sick: The Global Ocean in Crisis*"published in Canada by McClelland & Stewart and by The University of Chicago Press in the U.S. She is also the first Canadian to receive the honor, which includes an award of $75,000 in 2010.

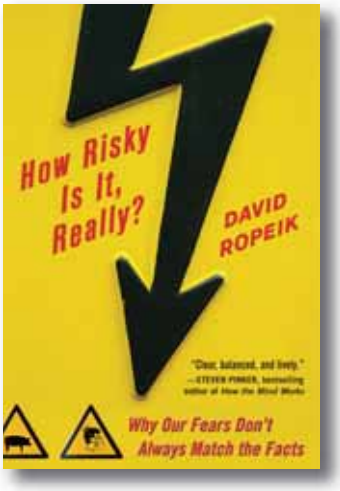
"An engaging work, *Sea Sick* clearly and eloquently explains the specific dangers facing global marine ecosystems," said **Sunshine Menezes**, executive director of the Metcalf Institute and Grantham Prize administrator. "Mitchell faced her own demons to craft a story that showcases marine science — and scientists — in a balanced, accurate, and poetic fashion."

This year, the Grantham Prize committee also gave three Awards of Special Merit, each offering a $5,000 cash prize. One went to **Dan Egan** of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* for his chronicles of the environmental challenges affecting the Great Lakes; **Cleo Paskal**, author of *Global Warring*, which examines the dire global security and geopolitical implications of climate change; and Hedrick Smith Productions for the PBS Frontline documentary "Poisoned Waters," which details America's failure to ensure the health of its waterways.

Deborah Fryer's documentary film about Parkinson's — SHAKEN: Journey into the Mind of a Parkinson's Patient — has recently won 2 Telly Awards (1 in the Documentary category and 1 in the Education category); it also won a People's Telly Award, and received 2 Gold Communicator Awards from the International Academy of the Visual Arts (again in the Doc and Education categories). Fryer is working on a 20th anniversary video for the "I Have A Dream" Foundation, which focuses on education for low-income children, and has a feature film in production about stem cells and neuroplasticity.

Judy Fahys is environment reporter at The Salt Lake Tribune *and can be contacted at fahys@sltrib.com.*

Book Shelf



Getting risk right, it really matters

How Risky Is it, Really?

Why Our Fears Don't Always Match the Facts

by David Ropeik
McGraw-Hill, $24.95

Reviewed by JENNIFER WEEKS

Asking an SEJ member whether modern life is risky is like asking if the Pope is Catholic — we take it as a given. Consider a recent set of headlines from SEJ's daily news roundup: out of ten stories, seven covered threats to the environment and human health (including climate change, pollution from oil and gas drilling, and weak enforcement of environmental laws), compared to three on solutions (rescued sea turtles, advanced battery research, and a way to help sheep and cows burp less methane into the atmosphere).

It's impossible to understand how modern society is affecting Earth's environment without considering risk. The problem, according to consultant and former journalist (and SEJ member) David Ropeik, is that Americans don't always judge correctly which risks matter most. At times they worry too much about small risks and not enough about big ones, a phenomenon he calls the "perception gap." Although the news media is not his main focus, Ropeik contends that journalists make the problem worse by playing up negative, frightening, or controversial issues and not putting risks into perspective.

How Risky Is It, Really? starts by explaining the biology of risk perception — which, Ropeik emphasizes, is a mix of emotion and reason. When our brains perceive a threat, they act first (triggering a "fight or flight or freeze response") and ask questions second. That's a protective response, especially when we face primal threats like a hissing snake or a club-wielding enemy.

Modern risks like tainted food or toxic waste are more complicated, so people have to gather facts and evaluate the problem. Since our time and attention spans are limited, we use mental short cuts to make judgments. For example, we focus on clusters of suspicious results (even if they could result from random chance). And we worry less about situations in which we feel in control than about risks that we believe are forced upon us. Cultural and political values also shape our decisions. If you believe that the government's role is to protect citizens from harm, you're likely to support banning a controversial substance like Bisphenol A from consumer products. An individualist who reveres personal responsibility and freedom of choice will see the nanny state at work.

Ropeik's point is that our response to risk is complicated, and it's pointless to tell citizens to be more rational (or regulators to be more humane). But he does want readers to think about risks in a more balanced way. As he notes, hundreds of excess deaths from auto accidents occurred after the 9/11 attacks because Americans were afraid to fly and took car trips instead, even though driving was statistically more dangerous. Others may worry more about food irradiation than about controlling their own weight, even in the face of warnings about obesity and health risks. "We have to fear both too much fear *and* too little. Both can be dangerous," Ropeik writes.

Discussing how the news media covers risk, Ropeik offers some specific pointers for journalists. News stories should report both relative risk (the statistical danger of X compared to Y) and absolute risk (the numerical odds of X occurring). Reading that the danger of X has doubled sounds dramatic on its own, but less so when the story goes on to say that 1 in 10 million people used to get X, but now 2 in 10 million people get it.

Risk reporting should also discuss both exposure levels and hazards. Who in a group or community is exposed to the risk at issue, by what pathways, over what period of time? What is the evidence showing or suggesting that exposure, at what levels, may be harmful? Ropeik admits that in the past he reported stories about hazardous waste sites "pointing an accusatory finger at pollution emitted from smokestacks or drainage pipes without offering my viewers any information on whether the tiny amounts they were being exposed to were hazardous."

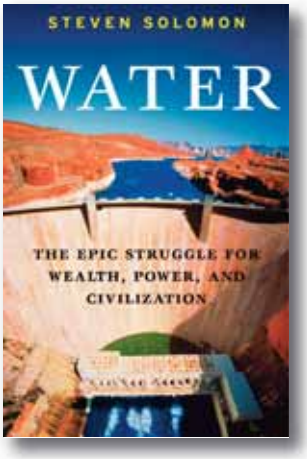
Getting risks right matters for society, too: it affects how much money we spend on treating diseases, developing new technologies, and regulating products and processes. In Ropeik's view, Americans worry too much about risks from nuclear power and not enough about health and environmental impacts from fossil fuel. And we don't worry enough about climate change, partly because many citizens still perceive it as an abstract issue that doesn't bear directly on their lives.

There's no quick fix for these tendencies. Just-the-facts reporting ignores the emotional component of risk perception, but playing to people's feelings on complex technical issues isn't the answer either — especially when the choice is between two risks. This book's core theme is that decisions (and, implicitly, reporting) about risk should be informed by both facts and values. Ropeik sums it up by quoting French philosopher Blaise Pascal: "We know the truth, not only by the reason, but by the heart."

Freelancer Jennifer Weeks lives and writes in Watertown, Massachusetts

Contact the SEJ office for information on how SEJ can help member authors spread the word about their books through a free web listing, possible Journal review, Journal book ad and low-cost press release.

linda.knouse@sejhq.org



The history of water's haves and have-nots warns of future conflict

Water:
The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power, and Civilization

by Steven Solomon
Harper, $27.99

Reviewed by CAROLYN JOHNSEN

In this massive, 608-page book, journalist Steven Solomon traces the history of Earth's civilizations through their uses of water and issues warnings about the effects of water scarcity on contemporary societies.

The history stretches from irrigation in the breadbaskets of the Nile and Mesopotamia to commerce on the Grand Canal in China, to the British defeat of the Spanish Armada, to the invention of the water wheel, to steam power's importance in the Industrial Revolution and to what Solomon calls the "sanitary revolution" of the 19th century.

The author presents an impressive amount of evidence for his thesis that the rise and fall of civilizations have depended largely upon the ability of "hydraulic societies" to manage freshwater and to respond effectively to opportunities for trade and conquest provided by the world's oceans and navigable rivers.

Solomon's energetic delivery generally carries the reader across centuries and continents with great clarity. But occasionally the writing loses energy in his chronicling of sea battles, barbarian invasions and opening of trade routes. So readers will welcome narrative gems about the making of paper and iron, Greek fire (an incendiary weapon) and an industrial espionage case involving silk.

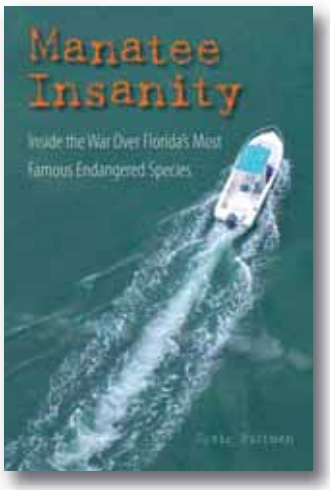
Solomon finds great import in hydraulic innovations and describes them with gusto. Rome's ability to provide freshwater to all classes of citizens, for example, "established a landmark civic standard." Also, "Long-range sea artillery ... has profoundly altered the course of world history" and steam-powered engines "utterly transformed the speed, scale, mobility, and intensity of man's material existence." In just one paragraph Solomon uses the terms "revolution," "watershed turning point," "breakthrough," "quantum jump" and "unprecedented explosion" to describe the impact of an act of the British Parliament that established a sanitary sewer system for London.

Solomon asserts that effective management of water resources led not only to political and commercial power but supported philosophy, art, science, mathematics and democracy. He provides a persuasive amount of evidence and is obviously deeply versed in the historical and contemporary literature on his topic, backing up his text with copious endnotes and bibliographical entries.

Faced with water scarcity and growing populations, however, modern governments aren't doing so well at managing water. Solomon writes, "Despite its growing scarcity and preciousness to life, ironically, water is also man's most misgoverned, inefficiently allocated and profligately wasted natural resource." He raises alarm about the growing distance between water "haves and have-nots." He points out that almost one-fifth of the people on Earth "lack access to at least a gallon per day of safe water to drink ..." compared with the 150 gallons per day for all uses available to each person in the United States. Solomon warns that these disparities will inevitably lead to conflict. He quotes a World Bank official who said in 1995, "Many of the wars this century were about oil, but those of the next century will be over water."

Using the past to anticipate the future, Solomon provides important context for anyone trying to understand the origins and impact of contemporary water issues.

SEJ member Carolyn Johnsen teaches science writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She has edited Taking Science to the People: A Communication Primer for Scientists and Engineers *to be published by the University of Nebraska Press in fall 2010.*



No sanctuary in Florida for the gentle, endangered sea cow

Manatee Insanity:
Inside the War over Florida's Most Famous Endangered Species

by Craig Pittman
University Press of Florida, $27.50

Reviewed by JoANN M. VALENTI

Despite its iconic status in Florida, the gentle, slow-moving manatee may soon be found only in popular lore and on a few vehicle license plates. *St. Petersburg Times* environmental journalist Craig Pittman issues this warning in his new book on the Florida manatee, the second he has published on major threats to the Florida environment. His previous title, *Paving Paradise: Florida's vanishing wetlands and the failure of no net loss*, came out last year and has received several book awards, including one from SEJ.

Pittman, a long-time, award-winning SEJ member, takes on powerboat owners, policy makers and environmentalists to tell the sea cow's story. A skilled investigator ripe with stories, he captures the history, politics, science and backwoods Florida "cracker" culture that explain its imperiled status.

Though listed as an endangered species in 1967 (prior to the passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1972), the manatee remains as imperiled today as it was decades ago. Thousands of

animals have perished after encounters with speed boats. Some estimates have two-thirds of the remaining manatee population scarred by propellers or hulls, many of the animals injured repeatedly. A quote from Jacques Cousteau aptly sums up the mess: protection of nature "all rests on man's ability to control himself." Manatees frequent the remaining springs around the state, particularly during colder weather. (For a look at some of Florida's critical springs, see *Aquiferious* by Margaret Ross Tolbert (2010) or go to aquiferious.com.)

In 18 chapters (some with catchy titles like "Barnacle Brain & Parrotheads" or "The Dude Abides") and 400 pages, Pittman evokes the feel of Florida and its characters and shares details not offered in newspaper accounts. If manatees could talk he'd likely find a way to interview them, too. He did swim with them — although wildlife specialists would like to see an end to that practice — and he watched biologists dissect them.

Here's a sample of the insanity Pittman couldn't fit in to his regular reports for the *Times*: A blond realtor in black leather pants and stiletto heels complains to TV news cameras covering one of the heated hearings to reduce manatee-boat collisions, "This creature is infringing on *my* habitat." (She cares less than a hoot, apparently, about the value of manatees as a tourist attraction. Her clients want houses on the water, with docks for their testosterone-fueled motorboats. Lots of 'em.) A columnist at a small town paper writes that "manatees looked to him like cigars in a toilet bowl that won't flush." This columnist, Pittman writes, argues "people are warm and fuzzy too" as he sided with those in favor of opening waterways that were put off limits to boaters to provide some small measure of safety for the animals.

Wildlife commissioners, Pittman reports, consistently choose human recreation over protecting flora or fauna. The environmental community, he also notes, has been too busy claiming turf and making compromises to be any help to scientists struggling to preserve the remaining manatee population. Restrict development? Not a chance. Get a handle on condos and cabin cruisers? Are you kidding? Places for the animals to hide — simple refuge — is at the heart of the manatee battle. There's no sanctuary for the state's wildlife, only fun in the sun and a final resting place for tropical respite seekers.

JoAnn Valenti, like Pittman a suffering Florida native, is a member of SEJournal's *Editorial Board.*

New Books from SEJ Members 2009-2010

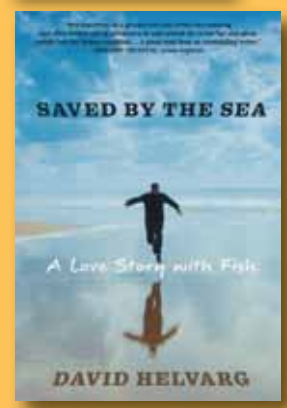
Members - To advertise your 2009-2010 book in the next four issues of SEJournal, email the SEJ office at linda.knouse@sejhq.org for an order form.

Human Scale

by Kitty Beer
It's 2062. Boston is mostly under water. Vita must confront her husband and battle to save her daughter while falling in love with an enigmatic spy. *Plain View Press*

Primitive

by Mark Nykanen
A model and her estranged activist daughter get caught up in the "war on terror" and global warming. marknykanen.com *Bell Bridge Books*



Saved by the Sea

A Love Story with Fish

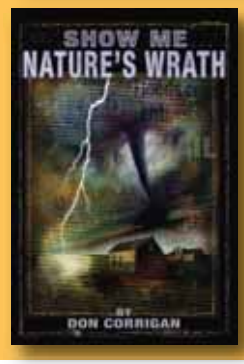
by David Helvarg

David Helvarg has lived a life often as endangered as the ocean he now works to protect. *Saved by the Sea* is their story. *St. Martin's Press*

Inside the Outbreaks

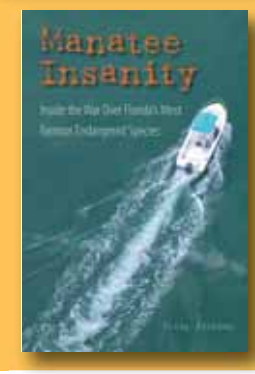
by Mark Pendergrast

The Epidemic Intelligence Service has battled everything from smallpox and zoonoses to pesticides, lead poisoning, emerging diseases, and the health impacts of climate change. *Houghton Mifflin Harcourt*



Show Me Nature's Wrath

by Don Corrigan
A compendium of great Missouri weather disasters with a final chapter on climate change impact as factors in recent meteorological events. *Reedy Press*



Manatee Insanity

by Craig Pittman
Loveable or loathed? Craig Pittman explores the uncertain fate of this unique species with an abiding interest and more than a touch of whimsy. *University Press of Florida*

SEJournal
Society of Environmental Journalists
P.O. Box 2492
Jenkintown, PA 19046
U.S.A.

U.S. COAST GUARD PHOTO BY PO3 ROBERT BRAZZELL

Hundreds of miles from the Deepwater Horizon oil leak, Dr. Sharon Taylor, a veterinarian with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Dan Alonso, the refuge manager, release two recovered brown pelicans back into the wild at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Gulf coast of south Texas in late June, bringing the total number of birds relocated there to 72, (compare with contaminated pelicans on pages 16-17). It was one of the few positive outcomes of a disaster whose worst ramifications may have yet to become clear. Deepwater Horizon coverage begins on page 5.