

Perspective on spill enlightening

By Scott Sexton
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Photographs of oil-slicked brown pelicans tug at the heartstrings and increasing seafood prices pull at the wallet, but the true magnitude of the disaster doesn't register until viewing a map of North Carolina with the area potentially affected by the spill superimposed over it.

From west to east, the area stretches from our border with Tennessee to Chapel Hill. From north to south, it spans an area from southern Virginia to the suburbs ringing Charlotte.

Mind-boggling. Stunning. Catastrophic.

Those are just the adjectives used by scientists, people who generally don't throw such words around lightly, when they opened a Web link that allows users to center the spill on any location.

"I've been listening and watching the news about it for weeks," said Jason Bodenhamer, a senior environmental specialist who works for the Forsyth County Environmental Affairs Department. "The size and scope of it is just ... it's mind-boggling."

Hunting for perspective

As often is the case when catastrophe happens, questions come faster than answers -- especially when the disaster is man-made.

In this instance, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico involves a great deal of uncertainty, projections and speculation, which tells me that we're just spitting in the wind looking for concrete answers.

That's why Andy Lintner, 29, a software developer from Royal Oak, Mich., decided to try to put it into perspective. Using his considerable computer skills, Lintner set up a website he named www.ifitwasmyhome.com.

Along with the latest news about the spill, he posted a counter that shows how many millions of gallons of oil have spewed into the Gulf of Mexico so far, video links and suggestions about what regular people can do to help. He also added a whiz-bang mapping tool that updates the size of the affected area nearly as often as the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration does.

His motivation was simple. After looking at a map in a local newspaper, his wife remarked that it didn't do much to help her visualize its scope. So he fired up Photoshop and centered the spill on their house.

"We were shocked to realize the scale of the thing," Lintner wrote in an e-mail yesterday. "I spent the rest of the night putting together the basic functionality of the site, allowing anyone to see the spill centered anywhere."

Let's face it, as a nation we're geographically challenged. We've all seen *National Geographic* studies that show one-third of adults can't place Louisiana on a map, so a tool such as this one is eye-opening.

What lies beneath

The link landed in my in-box last week. Like a lot of things, it rattled around my head for a few hours before I was able to process it.

I'd already been thinking about the spill. A co-worker who remembered the devastation caused by rain generated by Hurricane Floyd had asked whether a hurricane could scoop up oil and dump it inland.

(According to the National Hurricane Center and other experts, the short answer is "no." Oil won't evaporate like water, so it won't get absorbed into the atmosphere and reconstitute later as rain.)

As I was calling around to find that answer, I forwarded the link to Lintner's site to Bodenhamer and Rob Young, the director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University, a renowned academic center that does exactly what its name implies.

"The size is stunning and catastrophic," Young said. "And we don't even know how much (oil) is under the water."

Bodenhamer, too, zeroed in on the area under the map once he digested its size.

"The scientist in me wants to know how much is trapped in different layers as you go down," he said. "There have to be pools trapped at different layers. That's what we have to figure out: How much worse could it actually be?"

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Comparing sizes

According to one online model, when the area of the spill in the Gulf of Mexico is superimposed over North Carolina, it looks something like this:



Source: NOAA, www.fishwasmyhome.com

[Journal Map by Nicholas Weir - Click to enlarge](#)