

WCU scientists warn that Gulf will be permanently scarred by BP spill

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According to Adam Griffith, a research scientist from WCU's Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines (PSDS), the prognosis for the near future of the Gulf Coast is not very sunny: "Entire food webs may collapse from the bottom-up."

Griffith, along with Andrew Coburn, associate director of the PSDS, addressed the Franklin Rotary Club last Wednesday, July 28, giving an overview of their program and a grim report about the state of the shoreline in the Gulf.

In their presentation entitled, "Responding to disasters in the gulf: From hurricanes to oil spills," the scientists warned that the disaster could have far reaching implications. Moreover, some efforts to mitigate the disaster along the shoreline could possibly cause as much damage as the oil itself. Despite this dreary prognosis for the region, however, they did add that ultimately a new equilibrium would be established and, if given a chance, nature will re-assert itself.

"The beach is a public trust resource that is owned by everybody," said Coburn, who talked about PSDS's various areas of research. According to the program's website, the PSDS takes a worldwide view of modern coastal processes and geologic hazards, and examines the scientific basis for managing developed shorelines in a time of rising sea levels. It also advocates for the development and implementation of responsible strategies, plans, policies and actions that promote the long-term sustainability of our nation's coastal ecosystems.

The program focuses on everything from soil erosion to the ecological impacts of development and has recently been active in the Gulf of Mexico investigating the impact of the BP oil spill. "It's really poorly understood what the long term effects are going to be," said Griffith. He told the audience that many species are likely to be significantly affected, including bird species like the Reddish Egret — of which only about 1,500 breeding pairs remain in North America — as well as fish species such as Bluefin Tuna.

While Griffith did not play down the massive impact that the spill will have on the region, he also offered some words of encouragement and spoke about what the Gulf has going for it in terms of mitigating the long-term effects of the spill. Like other large salt marsh delta areas, the Gulf of Mexico is one of the most productive ecosystems on the planet, said Griffith, meaning there are extremely high levels of nutrient exchange.

"No, these systems will never get back to their previous state," he said, "but they will recover and a new equilibrium will be established ... We will lose salt marsh from the oil

spill. But in terms of what the long-term ecological effects will be, we'll just have to wait and see."