

RESPONDING TO OILED WILDLIFE INCIDENTS



An oiled swan is cut out of the ice in the aftermath of the mystery spill in Estonia in 2006. Many of the oiled casualties died in the extreme cold of -15°C. © RSPCA

An oil spill that takes place in an area with high densities of vulnerable marine species, especially seabirds, may cause a considerable number of casualties in a short time. Not every country is prepared to respond to such a wildlife incident. Although an oil spill response plan may be in place, it may not have a lot of detail with regards to a possible wildlife component. A main challenge will be how the oiled animals can be dealt with appropriately according to accepted standards of animal welfare. Another challenge will be how the public may react to the incident. A response manager will need hands-on help to collect animals from beaches and provide them with adequate treatment, but at the same time would like to avoid the involvement of untrained individuals, which could potentially jeopardize the health, safety and welfare of the animals.

In an incident that has affected marine wildlife, the expertise required to deal with casualties and to prevent the oiling of further animals is often not immediately available from local sources. The mobilisation of professional oiled wildlife responders on short notice is required in situations where a large number of animals have become oiled and are in need of professional care, or in which animals of high conservation value are involved.

For many years, Sea Alarm has facilitated the identification and mobilisation of trained expertise in order to increase the success of a response. In recent years, these activities have been further developed in close cooperation with *Oil Spill Response*. The structure that has been set up involves the cooperation of leading wildlife response groups from around the world and is available to the oil industry, and other stakeholders such as government authorities and NGOs. It aims to provide the best possible care to stricken animals in the most cost-efficient way, making the best use of available resources.

This article briefly outlines how this mobilisation procedure operates, which challenges may arise and what can be expected from it in the future.

MOBILISATION PROCEDURE

Notification

Anyone in need of professional oiled wildlife response assistance can call *Oil Spill Response's* or Sea Alarm's 24/7 emergency service. A call for assistance received by either organisation will launch the response procedure. Sea Alarm will collect as much information as possible, by contacting professional organisations and in-country resources. As soon as Sea Alarm has verified the incident and determined what the immediate local needs appear to be, other wildlife response organisations will be notified and involved.

From notification to a response

Sea Alarm will keep all interested wildlife responders posted on the latest developments, while making an assessment of which level of response might be needed to assist the response effort. Basically there are three different stages, or levels, at which assistance can be provided:

Level 1 involves conducting a telephone inquiry to assess the needs of an on-going oiled wildlife response and, where possible and appropriate, providing expert advice by phone and email.

Level 2 involves making an on-site assessment at the field locations where response activities are taking place and holding meetings with local experts, response groups and authorities.

Level 3 involves the deployment of a wildlife response team to the spill scene to lead or provide assistance to an oiled wildlife emergency response. The team's size and expertise is relative to the needs of the response. Pre-defined objectives are determined in consultation with the requesting party and/or local authorities.

The decision as to which level of assistance is required is based upon the information collected, and involves all the interested organisations, especially if a level 3 mobilisation is required. However, as a level 3 mobilisation is expensive, it is often preceded by an on-site assessment of feasibility.

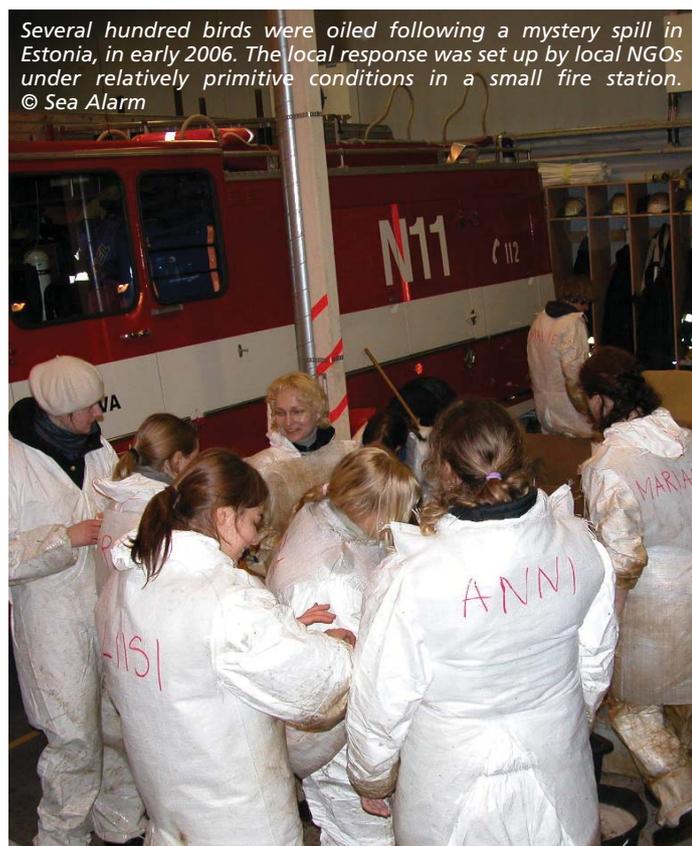
Assessment of feasibility

Although the mobilisation of an international team can make a vital difference to the quality of a response, this is not always the best solution. A team of two or three experienced responders is often needed in the first instance to assess the urgency of the situation, the quality of the on-going response and the difference that a mobilised international team could make.



The specialised wildlife equipment that is stored in flight containers in Oil Spill Response's warehouse in Southampton, UK, which is ready to be dispatched at a moment's notice. © Oil Spill Response

Sometimes the assessment team has to conclude that although the local response system has been active for a while, it has not been able to provide optimal care to the collected animals. If the condition of the animals is so deteriorated that further treatment would not make any difference, there is no need to mobilise a team. The assessment team may also conclude that it is not able to find the optimal facilities in a reasonable vicinity of the spill-affected beaches to set up a rehabilitation centre. In these circumstances, the task of the assessment team would be to make a local group accept that an effort to rehabilitate oiled animals is not possible under the given circumstances and that euthanasia is the most appropriate strategy.



Several hundred birds were oiled following a mystery spill in Estonia, in early 2006. The local response was set up by local NGOs under relatively primitive conditions in a small fire station.
© Sea Alarm

However, if the assessment team is convinced that the mobilisation of a team is worthwhile, financially and technically feasible, and supported by local stakeholders, including the authorities, then it could start making the necessary preparations for the arrival of a larger response team and/or equipment.

Organisation of a response team

There are a number of organisations that can provide a professional oiled wildlife response. Most of them focus on national preparedness and response in their respective countries; however, a few organisations operate an international response capability. Sea Alarm cooperates with the world's leading responders as part of a Directory of Oiled Wildlife Responders. These responders all know each other and may have worked together on previous occasions, greatly facilitating cooperation if mobilised to a spill as a team.

In the event of a developing incident that may require the assistance of an international team, Sea Alarm sends an alert to the members of the Directory of Oiled Wildlife Responders. Each organisation or individual can respond to this alert by indicating its availability. The strongest possible team is formed, and its involvement in the response is discussed with the party that has committed itself to bear the costs of the mobilisation and/or the on-site activities.

CHALLENGES

Time

From the outset of a notification, a major challenge is winning the race against the clock that is ticking for the affected wildlife. The faster a clear picture is formed of what is going on and what is needed, the better the interested community of wildlife responders can act. Even with an incomplete dataset, the decision to quickly dispatch an experienced assessment team is often taken. This enhances fact finding and enables the team to start to help direct the on-going response.

Visa, language and culture

Effective wildlife response assistance may be challenged by problems related to working abroad. Members of the team may need visas in order to enter the country in question, which may create delays. Language and cultural differences may also be at stake between members of the international team and local responders. The team must be sensitive to these differences, which in many cases can be overcome by including members with specific language skills on the team and/or working with a good and reliable local partner.

Integration into a local response

Following its mobilisation, an international team should smoothly integrate into the local response. The team should by no means "take over" the response, unless this was explicitly agreed with the local authorities beforehand. Integration of efforts should mean that the available international expertise is optimally used as part of the on-going response, working with the local groups and volunteers. This could mean that some experts are placed in an advisory or coordinating role, and assist in directing the various aspects of the wildlife response. Other experts could assist with the various hands-on activities, including search and collection, animal stabilisation and care, veterinary assistance, washing and waterproofing. If needed, scientific experts on the team could assist with setting up a sound data collection system to enable a population impact assessment, if required.

Ideally, local responders, including local experts and volunteers, work together with the international expert group, under the direct control of the incident command structure, so that the best use of resources and opportunities is achieved.



Volganeft spill (Kerch Strait, Russia, 2007)
Volunteers with a captured bird. © Sea Alarm

Finances of a response

The finances of a response are often the most critical aspect in the mobilisation procedure. Although the costs of an oiled wildlife response are normally only a tiny fraction of the overall costs of an oil spill response, most countries are ill prepared to deal with the wildlife component of a response. In the past, this has led to the absence of appropriate funding at the outset of mobilising international expertise. However, international experts are sometimes able to provide their own funding, which enables them to start working, at least in an advisory capacity.

However, a wildlife response may turn out to be costly and once an international team has taken the step to become involved, it is very hard, if not impossible to withdraw from it before the mission is completed. The cost of a response may quickly add up and go into several hundreds of thousands of Euros, especially if several hundreds of animals need to be cared for during a period of several months. Costs including the time, travel, hotel and subsistence costs of more than a handful experts, rent of facilities and costs of running water and electricity, the mobilisation and/or local purchase of specialised equipment, food and medicines for animals, and the well-being of several tens or hundreds of volunteers, all need to be taken into consideration.

Therefore the decision to mobilise experts in an international response should be based on a sound assessment, clear management objectives, and an explicit agreement with the party that is prepared to bear the costs, which could be one of the response organisations.

Planning

Having an oiled wildlife response plan in place as part of the national (or corporate) oil spill response plan can make all the difference to the success of an oiled wildlife response. A response plan provides guidelines on the mobilisation of a response on the basis of pre-spill defined resources and priorities with regards to the treatment of species (euthanasia or rehabilitation) of different conservation interest and under different scenarios (response near to appropriate facilities, response in remote areas), and with regards to the available budget.

As part of a response plan, the scenarios under which international assistance should be requested can be clearly described. A plan can also help to clarify what the financial basis for the response would be and to which extent the international assistance can be supported by local resources. The mobilisation of international resources as part of an agreed national plan is the ideal starting point, but unfortunately there is still a lot of work to be done to convince national authorities to put such a plan in place.

FUTURE

The described procedures and structures have been operational for many years, and are familiar to every organisation active in the field of oiled wildlife response. However, the professionalism of international oiled wildlife response has been greatly enhanced in recent years due to the increasing cooperation between the different response organisations and the respect that their joint efforts have received from other professional entities.

Good relationships have been built with key actors, such as maritime insurers (Protection & Indemnity Clubs), international compensation mechanisms (International Oil Pollution Compensation Funds), key operators (e.g. International Tanker Owners Pollution Federation), and stakeholders such as individual companies in the oil and maritime industries. For instance, the cooperation between Sea Alarm and *Oil Spill Response* has already made a strong contribution to the professionalism and advancement of oiled wildlife response, generating many spin-offs to oil companies, governments and NGOs. These relationships will

undoubtedly facilitate the future acceptance and integration of wildlife response in a variety of situations and also assist in its budgeting and and/or the compensation of costs afterwards.

The future will also be one in which wildlife response is increasingly part of the oil spill response and planning of coastal countries, a process that is already clearly evident in Europe. However, this is a long-term process as in many countries in the world oil spill response preparedness is still in its infancy, let alone wildlife response. This means that Sea Alarm and its partner response organisations need to continue their pioneering work and generate the funding required to carry on their coordinated efforts.



A completely oiled gannet is given first aid in the aftermath of the Prestige incident (Galicia, Spain, 2002). Many different international groups were active in the wildlife response. Sea Alarm's involvement in assisting with the smooth integration of these groups into the local system was requested by the P&I Club and IOPC Fund. © Sea Alarm

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**SEA ALARM WILL BE PRESENT AT THE
INTERSPILL 09 EXHIBITION; BOOTH NR. 242**

Sea Alarm is co-organising the 10th Effects of Oil on Wildlife Conference, the premier global conference series in the field of oiled wildlife response and planning. The conference will be held 5-9 October 2009 in Tallinn, Estonia. Further information at: www.eowconference09.org.