



Suited up: Trainers using personal protective equipment. —Photos courtesy Marianne Hosein

Responding to oiled wildlife

Dealing with animals covered in oil does not mean washing them off with dishwashing liquid

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Some people spill coffee; some people spill the beans. But in 1979 off the coast of Tobago, two oil tankers, the Atlantic Empress and Aegean Captain ran into each other and spilled an estimated 88 million gallons of oil. That's a different kind of spill. T&T is famous internationally for Brian Lara, nesting leatherbacks and steel pan. Thanks to that 1979 spill, we're also on the list of the world's largest

oil disasters; right up there with the 2010 Deep Water Horizon spill and the 1991 Gulf War. To date it's still the largest ship-sourced oil spill on record. Ouch.

Love them or hate them, oil and gas companies fuel T&T. There's no denying we are heavily dependent on the sector for its contribution to our prosperity. To access our nonrenewable resources, multinational energy companies undertake aggressive industrial activity. In T&T there is both land and offshore activity with increasing exploration and production in deep water areas. We also have large quantities of hydrocarbon-based products in tankers and carriers in transit through our waters. With increased activity comes increased risk. Oil is not something that can be mopped with paper napkins. An oil spill is an environmental catastrophe affecting human health and livelihoods. Is T&T prepared?

As of 2013, we have an updated National Oil Spill Contingency Plan. According to the website of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Affairs, this plan is designed to mitigate the impact of all oil spills on the environment by setting standards, establishing time frames for oil spill response and increasing collaboration among partner agencies. The website states increased exploration and production activity warrants an increase in precautionary measures, especially in light of the major oil spill incident in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010.

An iconic image from oil spills is floundering birds slowly dying, coated in oil. Oiled wildlife is an inevitable victim of such disasters and the national plan briefly addresses the establishment of an oiled wildlife response programme. To its credit, bp Trinidad and Tobago (bpTT) took the initiative in November to host an intensive oiled wildlife response workshop and train-the-trainer exercise under the guidance of Tyrone Kalpee, vice-president—Safety and Operational Risk. The sessions were run by international nonprofit organisations Sea Alarm Foundation and Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, which have worked globally with numerous spills. Objectives included preliminary steps toward an oiled wildlife response plan and training to manage, treat, rehabilitate and release oiled animals. Key stakeholders at the workshop included NGOs such as Wildlife Orphanage and Rehab Centre (WORC), El Socorro Centre for Wildlife Conservation, Council for the Presidents of the Environment (COPE), Environment Tobago, Asclepius Green, Zoological Society of Trinidad and Tobago, Trinidad and Tobago Veterinary Association; governmental agencies such as THA, Wildlife, Ministry of Energy; and others.

Dealing with animals covered in oil does not mean washing them off with dishwashing liquid. Oil is a toxic, hazardous substance that affects the environment, animals and us. Wildlife teams use specialised gear and personal protective equipment. An effective response requires search and rescue, stabilisation and husbandry, veterinary care, cleaning to remove hazardous substances, appropriate housing, facilities and equipment and personnel who are trained and ready to act. Although training and equipment are necessary, they are not sufficient. As a World War I general famously said, no plan survives contact with the enemy. In T&T, we are prone to headless-chicken behaviour during a disaster—running around getting angry, trying to figure out who's in charge, who's paying and who's to blame. No one wants a spill, but if it should happen, our success will depend on how well we work together. We look forward to continued support from bpTT and the energy sector to empower all stakeholders to collaborate and respond to oiled wildlife in the event of a disaster.

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