

Take a leaf out of green books and stand up for the birds

Quarterpoints Aline de Bievre - Wednesday 7 March 2007

THIS month 30 years ago, I was beavering away as a student volunteer in a cramped corner of the Advisory Committee on Oil Pollution of the Sea office in London when news broke of the Amoco Cadiz tanker grounding (Ushant, March 16, 1977).

The late Richard Cahill was later to write that the breakup of the very large crude carrier, which released more than 250,000 tonnes of crude oil — well over twice the amount spilt by the Torrey Canyon exactly 10 years before — was “perhaps the most momentous marine disaster of modern times”.

For me, the immense spill certainly put into perspective the scattered mosaic of ‘dots’ I was helping to put together for the Acops annual report on oil spills around the coasts of the British Isles.

The laborious, manual exercise involved translating a large amount of survey responses from local and regional authorities and individual eyewitness accounts of oil pollution — both chronic and accidental — from ships and other sources into a comprehensive picture of incidents for display onto a big wall map.

There were different coloured dots for pollution in estuaries and at sea, shore pollution under and over one mile and pollution in docks, harbours and navigable waterways.

Additional information from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds was used to highlight rehabilitation and other measures taken to rescue and clean beached birds, make good fishing gear and boats and reinstate coastal amenities.

In those early heydays of environmental campaigning other devoted non-governmental organisations, like the Keep Britain Tidy group and the Amsterdam-based Werkgroep Noordzee, also gained public recognition for their pioneering cataloguing techniques and critical watch of activities impacting on the marine and coastal environment.

Confrontational as it may often be, the environmental movement has much to offer in promoting imaginative tools and policies. The other day, I was once again convinced of this core value by two leading lights of the independent Sea Alarm Foundation, a charity dedicated to improving the treatment of wildlife affected by oil spills.

Hugo Nijkamp, a professional sea use policy and management professional, is the organisation’s round-the-clock working director and Ian White, who attended ship-source oil spills around the world for over 25 years, its mentor and vice-chairman.

Both are marine biologists with an infectious zest for scientific rigour and practical solutions.

Sipping a large coffee on a rare sunny winter afternoon at London’s South Bank, I forgot the cold Thames wind and the time in their enthusiastic company.

Oiled animals tend to be the focal point of media frenzy and public outrage in the wake of an incident. Yet politicians and public authorities, as well as the shipping industry, seem quite content to leave wildlife response to voluntary initiatives, even though these tend to be overwhelmingly dependent on different and mostly ill-co-ordinated groups with little or no technical expertise and lacking the required facilities and other resources to deal with a large-scale response. By way of example, the Erika incident affected some 33,000 birds. The Tricolor incident’s bunker spill was

only 170 tonnes but oiled over 4,600 seabirds in three weeks and affected an estimated 20,000 wintering birds, the same total as that of the Prestige incident.

The RSPB reported over 1,600 oiled birds in the first fortnight of the MSC Napoli incident.

Sea Alarm's principal objective is to improve professionally informed co-operation across political and cultural divides by acting as a level-headed provider, in advance of an incident, of scientific and other information on wildlife profiles in different countries and regions, key contacts and contingency planning training and expertise. It sees its role as a bridge builder, establishing links and reconciling relationships between government authorities and other stakeholders so that common strategies of preparedness and sensible practices become a realistic proposition.

The key to diffusing often unhelpful — and potentially very expensive — emotionally charged responses to the distress of affected wildlife no doubt lies in mobilising forces towards a much more integrated approach to government-led contingency planning.

To be successful, this must also embrace coherent and consistent pre-spill guidelines and action plans for the capture, clean-up, rehabilitation and release of wildlife.

At present, Sea Alarm is based in Europe but its activities are spreading increasingly to coastal states further afield, evidencing growing recognition of the immutable fact that the public expects humane treatment of suffering wildlife.

Significantly, the oil industry — through the Oil Spill Response Limited/Global Alliance — had already decided, two years ago, to provide structured funding on an annual basis with the specific aim of helping to establish an international preparedness capacity of wildlife response skills and equipment stockpiles.

There is also an obvious benefit for shipowners to step into the breach and become devoted Sea Alarm ambassadors. They might even do so jointly, through their P&I insurers.

All major P&I clubs already co-operate unfailingly in respect of technical assistance to oil spills through their subscriptions to ITOPF, the not-for-profit worldwide pollution federation of tanker owners.

So, to all shipowners of the world, I say: stand up and join up via www.sea-alarm.org