PREPARING FOR OILED WILDLIFE EMERGENCIES

BP is one of 15 sponsors of Sea Alarm, a Brussels-based non-profit foundation set up to ensure that response planning for oil spills around the coasts of Europe includes wildlife. ROBIN KNIGHT describes the challenges Sea Alarm faces and how it is meeting them.

"Tall oaks from little acorns grow" wrote David Everett in the 18th century. Hugo Nijkamp, an engaging Dutchman who has devoted the last seven years of his life to establishing Sea Alarm, hopes there is still truth in the old aphorism.

Sea Alarm is a project-oriented organisation that was set up in late 1999 to "facilitate and motivate strategic alliances among non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the oil industry and official organisations." With minimal resources but great energy and commitment it has become a key player in a European-wide drive to improve the way wildlife is treated if and when there is an oil spill incident at sea around the coasts of the continent.

The need for such an initiative seems clear. Of the 25 countries in the European Union, for example, only Belgium so far has compiled a response plan for an oil spill emergency that includes commitments to deal with wildlife. Later this year Belgium is expected to achieve another first when it holds a telephone exercise to find out if its plan works.

"Sea Alarm's aim is to change this situation by building bridges - between wildlife groups who respond to such emergencies, industry, local and national governmental bodies and campaigning NGOs," says Nijkamp. "We try to give a push towards greater cooperation, raise standards, encourage learning and information-sharing and reconcile differences."

Why does any of this matter? The main reason, says Nijkamp, is that the state of preparedness for an efficient response to oil spills involving wildlife is below acceptable levels in most European countries. By raising standards, better outcomes can be achieved in terms of human safety, animal welfare and survival, cost efficiency and scientific data collection.

“We have an independent role - we're not working for the oil industry or wildlife groups or governments," Nijkamp explains. "For us it's important to keep everyone involved. Only by sharing knowledge and working together can we produce commonly-accepted standards - and that's one of our key objectives. In fact the issue isn't so much the standards as what is done with them and by whom. The best way to describe what we're doing is acting as a catalyst for common sense."

For most of its short history, Sea Alarm has faced an uphill struggle to raise the funds it needs if it is to turn its ambitious vision into reality. In 2004-05 only support from BP Shipping, among others, kept the organisation afloat while it was developing a business plan.

That initiative bore fruit in October, 2005, when the oil industry through the Oil Spill Response Ltd) / Global Alliance agreed a programme that provides structural funding on an annual basis, so allowing the Foundation to concentrate on its core purpose - ensuring best use is made of the expertise available in any oiled wildlife response. A key role in the OSRL breakthrough, says Nijkamp, was played by Jim Thornborough - then BP's Emergency Response Manager, now Crisis Management & Emergency Response Team Leader for BP Angola.

"Sea Alarm is a useful organisation," says Simon Lisiecki, BP's Director, Government & Industry. "For instance, we're interested in its work to build a country profile data base which details things like key contacts, the relevant oil spill regulatory regime and any local wildlife response plans - all of which can affect how an incident is handled."

The Foundation also offers the oil industry access to scores of large and small, known and unknown groups around Europe that exist to protect wildlife and especially birds. "It's not easy for the industry to have any sort of working relationship with these groups," says Nijkamp. "There is understandable suspicion. We're able to offer a 'neutral' forum where people can meet and talk, share experiences and describe what they're doing."

An oiled gull is tended in Estonia after a mystery spill affected over 3000 birds, of which 500 arrived live on the beaches.
Two recent tanker incidents have had a major impact on Sea Alarm's profile and reputation – the Prestige incident in Galicia, Spain, in November, 2002, and the Tricolor Incident off Belgium in January, 2003. On both occasions Sea Alarm advised the oiled wildlife rescue and rehabilitation operation at the time. Later it researched and wrote reports on the incidents for the authorities in charge of clean-up operations. It also helped wildlife groups in Belgium to recover most of the cost of their involvement through insurance claims.

Following these experiences the Foundation started to develop some general guidelines for oiled wildlife response planning. These were subsequently published by IPIECA (International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association) in late-2004 as Volume 13 in the organisation's report series on oil spill response and preparedness, and were funded by in part by a contribution from BP.

Today much of Sea Alarm's attention is concentrated on four European littoral states – Belgium, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands. In each country it brings interested parties together, chairs workshops, discusses oiled wildlife response planning with local authorities and tries to move participants towards an agreed coordinated strategy and common levels of preparedness.

"It's often hard work. And sometimes it's rather difficult to see progress," says Nijkamp, reflecting, for example, the slow advance made by the International Alliance of Wildlife Responders in developing internationally-accepted standards for its role. "But the more experience and case studies Sea Alarm has to show, the better our future possibilities."

In 2006 Sea Alarm is hoping to win its first grants from the European Commission to run three workshops covering all EU littoral states. These will concentrate on response planning and minimum standards. Work will move ahead on the country profile data base and the creation of a global pool of skilled wildlife responders who can build capacity worldwide. A newsletter is promised every six months. Meetings are scheduled with the oil and shipping industries, wildlife groups and local, regional and national governments. And a 24/7 emergency response centre will soon become operational to provide advice or assistance.

Nijkamp has no doubts about the value of this effort. "Everybody is damaged by incidents like the Prestige," he argues. "This applies to the oil and shipping industries, NGOs, wildlife groups and local and national governments. There's a need to raise standards all-round – not just in terms of shipping safety but also in terms of wildlife rehabilitation, on-the-ground organisation after incidents and local/national response planning. We should all learn from each other. That's my personal interest in Sea Alarm. By cooperating, everyone can win."

An environmental consultant by training, Nijkamp first got involved with Sea Alarm after writing reports on the feasibility of establishing an international fund to reimburse wildlife groups for the costs of saving oiled birds and mammals affected by oil spills. Today he regards governments as among his toughest challenges. "Most governments in Europe are aware, but the wildlife issue isn't high priority. They tend to do nothing until it's too late."

Five years since it was set up Sea Alarm already has some worthwhile achievements to its name. The most important, Nijkamp reckons, is that it has avoided conflicts and been able to work on a friendly basis with so many diverse groups. Its impartiality has allowed it to add value to everything it has attempted and, he says created a 'brand' of substance – an independent organisation that is trusted and heard. He adds: "It's important, too, that the diverse interests that support Sea Alarm still feel able to come to us to develop higher levels of awareness about oiled wildlife."

With structural funds committed on an annual basis by Sea Alarm supporters such as OSRL, new work areas opening up and the Foundation's reputation for even-handedness growing year by year, a fresh chapter in its short history is beginning. "We've shown our concepts can work and we've got a better sense of what's possible," says Nijkamp. "Now things are going much faster."