

**Introduction**

Azerbaijan, which is located at the southeastern part of the Caucasus, borders the Caspian Sea together with four other countries including Iran, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and Turkmenistan. The Caspian Sea, which is the world's largest isolated inland sea, is a unique, yet vulnerable marine ecosystem rich with endemic species.

The 800 km of Azerbaijan coast (including the Absheron peninsula, the Sara peninsula and the Kura sand bar) consist of extensive deltas, shallows and saline marshes, which are a habitat for a great variety of waterfowl, both year-round and migratory, including a number of threatened species. The Caspian Seal (*Phoca caspica*), which is one of only two species of freshwater seals in the world, inhabits the Caspian. The seals are found in Azerbaijan waters from April/May to November, albeit there is a small resident population. Most of them are found on the offshore islands and to the north of the Absheron peninsula. About 80-90 % of the world sturgeon populations are located in the Caspian Sea.

There are important hydrocarbon reserves in the Caspian Sea. Since the sea is landlocked and the oil is located far from current world markets (Caspian littoral states are not major energy consumers with the exception of Russia Federation) and established transported routes, a number of oil pipelines have been built or are under construction, and several regional gas pipelines have been proposed as well. For example, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline transports crude oil from the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli (ACG) offshore oil fields in the Azeri sector of the Caspian to the Mediterranean Sea (Turkey).

The sharp boost in the exploratory drilling, offshore production (especially in sensitive areas such as the Absheron Peninsula), shipment of refined products and near future-increases in crude oil shipment, have been increasing the risk of oil pollution. Moreover, the country's location in a seismically active area adds special risk. It is feasible that a relatively small volume of spilled oil could lead to a significant number of oiled wildlife, especially birds, if circumstances were unfavorable.

**Regional Seas**

Caspian Sea

**Past experience**

Albeit no major oil spills have occurred so far in Azerbaijan waters, it is widely felt that the Caspian is under pressure (ITOPF).

According to the Ornithological Laboratory of the Academy of Sciences, oiled seal carcasses are regularly found on the coast. As yet it is not clear if oil was the primary cause of their death. In April 1998, an oil spill in Gil Island caused a mass mortality of waterbirds. In total 30.000 birds died including six different species. In June 1998, a hundred oiled birds and seven oiled seals were found dead in Dashlar (Oil Rocks) and in Zenbil island. Near the Lake Hajigabul, an important winter and breeding grounds for waterbirds where oil pipelines are located, oiled birds were reported every week from October to November 1999. Different literature reported oiled wildlife incidents in the lakes of Absheron peninsula (Tuayev, Vasilyev, 1972, Sultanov, 1991).

**Response: the role of the authorities**

At present Azerbaijan doesn't have a national oil spill contingency plan, but has started a process to develop one. The Caspian littoral States have drafted a 'Caspian Sea Plan Concerning Regional Co-Operation in Combating Oil Pollution in Cases of Emergency'. Whilst the Plan proposes communication and coordination mechanisms between governments, it does not contain specific reference to oiled wildlife response. It is rather unlikely that the official regional plan will be nationally implemented in the near future.

The Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources (MENR) is the competent authority responsible for oil spill response and preparedness, which would include oiled wildlife. The State Veterinary Service under the Ministry of Agriculture most likely will be in charge of the animal welfare issues.

British Petroleum plays an important role if an oiled wildlife incident occurs within the geographic scope of BP's

operations in Azerbaijan. BP has put a Wildlife Response Plan in place can be activated (at three tiered response levels) according to the severity of the incident. Wildlife response capacity may be offered by BP even if the incident does not involve BP interests or responsibilities. A Regional Coastal Sensitivity Study has been carried out by BP, which divides the coastline into seven zones and identifies coastal habitats ranked against an Environmental Sensitivity Index.

### **Oiled wildlife response**

#### Formal guidelines?

An oiled wildlife response plan was developed and approved in June 2004 by BP jointly with other stakeholders. The plan identifies both local and international organisations and relevant stakeholders who will perform an oiled wildlife response on behalf of BP. The direction and oversight of any wildlife response team will be undertaken by international expertise (the IFAW ER team is mentioned in the Plan to lead a larger response), through liaison and integration with the oil companies overall response team.

There are three levels of wildlife response activation based on the number of oiled animals involved:

- Wildlife Level 1 involves those incidents likely to lead to 20 or fewer oiled animals needing rehabilitation. The Wildlife Branch will be activated and overseas expertise mobilized to lead response (1 person) with assistance from local personnel. Additional resources from overseas may be mobilized.
- Wildlife Level 2 will be developed when a wildlife response capacity is established by BP within Georgia and Turkey.
- Wildlife Level 3 involves incidents likely to lead to greater than 20 oiled animals needing rehabilitation. The Wildlife Branch will be activated and overseas expertise mobilized to lead the response (3 persons). Additional resources from overseas may be mobilized.

The Wildlife Branch of BP has the functional responsibility for all aspects of oiled wildlife response operations and covers the following items: reconnaissance, search and collection; protection strategies; oiled wildlife capture; cleaning and rehabilitation facilities; release and monitoring and collection and documentation of dead oiled wildlife. BP has also a Public Information Officer (PIO), a Media Response Team which can be mobilized to provide support, additional resources, expertise and language skills and a Personnel-Logistics Coordinator who is responsible for the overall coordination of volunteers and the allocation of their responsibilities.

#### Response objectives and strategy

This Wildlife Response Plan (WRP) aims to provide a tool to ensure that BP has in place procedures to respond in an efficient manner to incidents which may threaten or lead to oiled wildlife. A priority is to concentrate effort on preventing damage to wildlife during an incident. Procedures to ensure humane treatment of oiled wildlife are established. The severity and specific requirement of an incident determines whether all the teams are mobilised and the extent of their involvement. It is imperative that all persons involved in the wildlife response have adequate and appropriate training or experience to fulfill their allocated roles.

#### Euthanasia or rehabilitation?

It will be attempted to rehabilitate birds and seals. They will be treated according to existing stranding protocols. These procedures should be used in conjunction with up-to-date protocols available from the International Fund for Animal Welfare or other members of the International Alliance of Oiled Wildlife Responders. The oiled wildlife response may include euthanasia. Priority should be given to animals with high conservation value, with fair to good prognosis for release. Animals exhibiting symptoms of infectious diseases that may be transmissible to the larger group or to the wild population should be isolated immediately and considered for euthanasia.

#### Impact assessment

No specific guidelines are given on impact assessment.

It is duty of the Environment Unit Leader to identify experts to assess the impact on wildlife and maintain accurate up-to-date information on wildlife and habitat impacts and rehabilitation operations, including documentation of successes and mortalities.

It can be assumed that post-mortem examinations and the collection tissue and blood samples from dead seals will be carried out by the Geological Institute of the Azerbaijan Republic Academy of Sciences. After necropsy (if appropriate) any wildlife carcasses will be incinerated.

#### Notification and early response

In the event of an oil spill, BP will support the notification, mobilization and organization of local and international specialists. A trained response team from BP will be mobilised from the nearest operational centre(s), the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources (MENR) and other stakeholders will be alerted to the situation, and the oil response operation will start following a recognised chain of command. If the number of casualties is likely to be greater than 20 animals, foreign expertise will be called in and a temporary wildlife hospital build.

#### **Wildlife responders**

At present there is neither wildlife response capacity nor expertise with the treatment of oiled marine wildlife in Azerbaijan. According to Azerbaijan Society for the Protection of Animals (ASPA), which is one of the most active local organisations, there is one state dependent wildlife rescue centre that deals with non marine wildlife. ASPA's long term goal is to establish a permanent wildlife rescue centre for birds.

#### Seabirds

Jointly with ASPA, the Azerbaijan Ornithological Society (AOS), which is the Birdlife International partner, carries out research projects on bird population dynamics, oiled wildlife impact assessment and Important Bird Areas. The Institute of Zoology, the Azerbaijan Zoology Society and the Baku Zoo are also mentioned at the plan as local organizations that should be involved in an oiled wildlife response incident.

#### Marine mammals

Seal operations are managed by the Institute of Geology of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences. The Seal Research and Rehabilitation Centre in Pieterburen (Netherlands) trained one participant from each of the Caspian littoral countries in the Netherlands, July 2006,. The training covered issues related to seals rehabilitation and release, control and monitoring of a protected area, seal nursing and birds cleaning. There are a number of international Institutes and organisations that were involved in the mass die-off of Caspian Seals caused by Canine Distemper Virus during the spring of 2000 that could bring international expertise (see references).

In Azerbaijan, many local NGOs are actively involved in programmes and projects in relation to marine conservation and environmental issues regarding the Caspian sea area, including NGO Crude Alternative, Azerbaijan Society for Nature Protection Environmental Society Ruzgyar, Green Movement of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan Birds Ecology and Protection Association and Centre of Regional Development. All of them may offer local expertise and knowledge on the types and distribution of species at the time of an incident and volunteers through their networks. In case that the wildlife response likely to be greater than 20 animals, which is the assessed maximum local response capacity, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and International Bird Rescue Research Center (IBBRC) will be mobilized according to the plan. If needed, a temporary facility nearer to the incident location will be set up.

Baku State University (Caspian Research & Information Centre) is involved in coastal, environmental and oil pollution research

At the regional level, the Caspian Environment Programme (CEP), the Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN) and Caspian Seal Conservation Network may be able to provide useful information in the aftermath of a future incident.

#### **Cooperation between stakeholders**

n.a.

#### **Permanent facilities**

Briggs Environmental Services ("Briggs") warehouse and offices have been identified as the primary choice for the establishment of a temporary wildlife rehabilitation facility. This is located about 15 minutes from Baku city centre at Shikh Settlement, Saiyan Highway (North Side), Sabail District, Baku. The construction of temporary walls or rooms for the rehabilitation centre within the warehouse may start as soon as the decision is made to activate a wildlife response.

## **Current processes**

A meeting organised by BP was held in May 2007 (BP Georgia) with the aim to bring together interested NGOs to discuss their potential role in wildlife response and possible involvement in a 3-day training course on oiled wildlife response.

## **Documentation and references**

General references

Wildlife Response Plan

Sultanov, E. 2006. Results of eight years of monitoring wintering and nesting waterbirds in Azerbaijan. Waterbirds around the world.

Mass Die-Off of Caspian Seals Caused by Canine Distemper Virus

Literature about the effects of oil on birds

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