

More oil spills to come, says WUSTL anthropologist

June 30 2010



The Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is not simply a random accident, says WUSTL anthropologist Bret Gustafson.

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is not simply a random accident. There will be more of these spills to come, as the days of easy oil are over, says an anthropologist at Washington University in St. Louis.

“BP and other oil companies have tried to portray this spill as an accident or an aberration, but in fact there are spills on off-shore and on-shore sites around the world, increasingly,” says Bret Gustafson, PhD, associate professor of [anthropology](#) in Arts & Sciences. Gustafson teaches a course on “Oil Wars: America and the Cultural Politics of Global Energy.”

A rig sank off the coast of Venezuela in May. Last October, a rig spilled oil for two months into the Timor Sea off of Australia. There are recurring spills in virtually every oil region, such as the Peruvian and Ecuadorian Amazon and Nigeria.

“These environmental and public health catastrophes are almost always accompanied by corruption and violence tied to oil activities,” Gustafson says. In the United States, which is more of a consumer than producer of oil, we are generally ignorant about this reality of oil until something like this comes home to roost.”

“Oil has always been destructive, but it is worsening because the days of easy oil are over,” says Gustafson, who currently is studying Bolivia's natural gas boom and the cultural politics of energy resources in Bolivia and neighboring Brazil, which consumes most of Bolivia's gas.

“In combination with weak regulation and intensifying competition, which explains why companies are willing to cut so many corners, oil is in more difficult places, both environmentally, politically and socially,” Gustafson says. “The point is that it is only going to get worse, and that the message by some commentators and the oil companies that we should just get on with business as usual is, quite frankly, almost criminal.”

Gustafson suggests that along with policies to transition us beyond oil and changes in our culture of consumption, we might also debate whether state control of oil companies, popular in other nations around the world, could work in the United States.

At least that way, Gustafson suggests, benefits would accrue to America's public needs, rather than to multinational firms like BP. “Right now, the American people are subsidizing Big Oil, not benefitting from it,” he says.

“The press and public are only now debating the benefits or costs of regulation, but in fact the United States is the odd-man out in the world, where regulation goes along with government ownership and control,” Gustafson says. “Nearly all oil-producing countries, and not just third world ones, have government run oil companies, called National Oil Companies (NOCs). In places like Norway and Brazil, these contribute greatly to social benefits. Even the World Bank sees NOCs as a potential contributor to economic development. This is not a radical idea.”

Gustafson finds it curious that “our own culture of oil has largely silenced debate on whether or not having a national oil company would address both the environmental and regulatory concerns, as well as some of our other economic needs. Ideally, public and environmental concerns, rather than profit, would be the motivating logic behind oil operations.”

“The cultural addiction we have to oil contributes to both our relative ignorance about its negative effects and our relative willingness to accept these negative effects when they happen,” Gustafson says. “Despite the fact that most of us distrust big [oil companies](#) — we vilify them in our movies, our literature and our daily conversations — we are also generally complacent about what they do. When something like [oil](#) is so pervasive, it easily becomes invisible or at least very durable and resistant to cultural reflection and change.”

The one benefit of the spill, despite its catastrophic effects, may be, says Gustafson, that more of these issues are being brought into public discussion.

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

Citation: More oil spills to come, says WUSTL anthropologist (2010, June 30) retrieved 17 April

2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-06-oil-wustl-anthropologist.html>

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