

A research study analyzes marine spill prevention policies in Spain

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This is a person's hand covered in crude contaminates from an open toxic pool in the the Ecuadorean Amazon rainforest. Credit: Rainforest Action Network

A study at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (Spain) analyzing the capacity of a society to deal with maritime disasters such as the Prestige concludes that in Spain public measures still have not been taken to coordinate reaction when confronting this type of spills.

The study analyzes the actions adopted by a dozen countries after suffering disasters similar to that of the Prestige, the [oil tanker](#) which sank off the coast of Galicia towards the end of 2002, provoking a spill of fuel-oil which turned out to be one of the biggest ecological disasters in the history of Spain. "We have seen that our country has not adopted technical nor legal preventative measures, as opposed to what happened in Germany with the shipwreck of the Pallas, for example, which

produced a movement of a centralizing nature, in detriment to the federal spirit that had existed until then", revealed the UC3M professor, José Ignacio Cases, editor of the book "Catástrofes medioambientales: la reacción social y política" (Environmental disasters: social and political reaction) (Tirant Lo Blanch, 2010), where the results of this study are presented.

This work, in addition to containing a comparative study of the policies carried out after maritime spills in Germany, Australia, Denmark, Spain, the United States, France, Norway, Portugal, United Kingdom and Romania, entails a reflection upon the risks for today's societies consisting of two main parts. The first part deals with the mainstays regarding those who carry out public policy in this matter and contains conceptual essays on specific themes which are tackled after being applied to concrete cases, such as civil society, ecologism, non-institutionalized participation, the precautionary principle and sustainable growth. The second part delves deeper into the lessons that can be learned from the management of the crisis generated by the sinking of the Prestige and overall, in how this knowledge can be translated into three aspects, the models for prevention, the decision making processes and communication during the crisis, and lastly, adoption of measures and policy implementation..

Participation of the civil society

Another conclusion drawn by the researchers is that in all of the countries studied there is an elevated number of nonpublic actors that, among their distinct objectives, pursue maritime spill prevention, management and evaluation. Among these we can highlight public companies (ports) and private ones, the industries linked to the transport of hydrocarbons, the nongovernmental organizations and the citizens themselves who become volunteers when an emergency occurs. "One example was the citizen movement behind the Prestige incident through

the Nunca Mais platform, although the moment that this movement was perceived as a political instrument it did lose a large part of its power of convocation," explained José Ignacio Cases, who is the Head of the UC3M Political Science and Sociology Department.

When an environmental disaster happens, in western societies there is very often a large citizen movement which can represent support for government action, but it also can be a highly critical element, the researchers remarked. "For that reason, communication and explanation of the cause of the disaster and the diffusion of the measures adapted are essential issues," Professor Cases pointed out, who added that the political reaction usually is slower and is conditioned by social mobilizations. "You have to take advantage of the social mobilizations that these cases produce to give them a larger role in disaster management, especially when they manifest themselves in such an intense matter as was the case of Nunca Mais," he noted. At any rate, it is more important and better, according to the researchers, to apply the precautionary principle (and keep, if at all possible, the disaster from occurring) than to have to attend to the principle of reaction (confronting the disaster that has already happened).

Provided by Carlos III University of Madrid

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