

Researchers call for a new direction in oil spill research

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Inadequate knowledge about the effects of deepwater oil well blowouts such as the Deepwater Horizon event of 2010 threatens scientists' ability to help manage and assess comparable events in future, according to an article that a multi-author group of specialists will publish in the May issue of *BioScience*. Even federal "rapid response" grants awarded to study the Deepwater Horizon event were far more focused on near-surface effects than on the deepwater processes that the BioScience authors judge to be most in need of more research.

The article, by a team led by Charles H. Peterson of the University of North Carolina, argues that a fundamentally new approach to the study of deepwater oil spills is needed. Previous research has focused mainly on effects on organisms found near the [sea surface](#) and on coasts. The new approach would also stress how oil and associated gas released at depth move through the sea and affect subsurface and bottom-dwelling organisms. The new approach is all the more important because the [oil industry](#) is now putting most of its exploration efforts into deep water.

Peterson and his colleagues point out that existing policies and legislation have notably failed to provide for research initiated promptly after a spill has been detected. This has prevented studies that might have guided emergency response procedures two years ago, in particular studies of the effects of [chemical dispersants](#). These were used extensively while the Deepwater Horizon spill was in progress, although there is little consensus on their effectiveness.

There remain "serious gaps" in background information needed for longer-term assessments of comparable spills, according to Peterson and his coauthors. Much more information is needed about deep-sea ecology and the processes by which oil released at depth is degraded by [microbes](#), for example. The gaps impede not only litigation and improvement of government policy, but also attempts to restore damaged ecosystems

Provided by American Institute of Biological Sciences

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