



## IXTOC I OIL SPILL – JUNE 3, 1979 – BAY OF CAMPECHE

### Spill Data

- The spill began on June 3, 1979 and was finally contained on March 23, 1980
- The spill was the largest offshore oil spill in history as 138 million gallons flowed into the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>1</sup>
- Oil spilled at a rate of 10,000 to 30,000 barrels per day (420,000 to 1,260,000 gallons per day).<sup>2</sup>
- By mid-June a large oil slick covered more than 3,000 square kilometers.<sup>3</sup>
- A blowout at a exploratory well in 50 meters of water caused the 290-day long spill.<sup>4</sup>
- The platform caught fire and sank into the wellhead area, thwarting early attempts to control the blowout.<sup>5</sup>

### Cleanup Efforts

- Planes dropped the chemical dispersant Corexit 9527 on the oil, treating 1,100 square miles of the slick.<sup>6</sup>
- Dispersants were not used in U.S. waters because of their inability to treat weathered oil.<sup>7</sup>
- PEMEX, Mexico's government-owned oil company responsible for the spill, first pumped mud into the well to reduce the flow before pumping steel, iron and lead balls to further slow the flow.<sup>8</sup>
- Two relief wells were also drilled.<sup>9</sup>
- Tropical storm activity, including Hurricane Henri hampered cleanup operations.<sup>10</sup>

### Ecological Impacts

- Over 800,000 barrels of oil sank to the bottom of the Gulf.<sup>11</sup>
- Over 200,000 barrels of oil washed ashore on Mexican beaches.<sup>12</sup>
- 71,500 barrels of oil (3,003,000 gallons) impacted 162 miles of U.S. beaches.<sup>13</sup>
- Over 10,000 cubic yards of oiled material were removed from U.S. beaches.<sup>14</sup>
- 1,421 birds, including herons, egrets and terns, were found with oiled feathers or feet.<sup>15</sup>
- Approximately 10,000 endangered Kemp Ridley turtles were removed from nesting sites in Mexico to avoid possible contamination by oil.<sup>16</sup>
- Crab populations, particularly the ghost crab, suffered severe population losses in Mexico.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Garmon, Linda (1980-10-25). "Autopsy of an Oil Spill." *Science News* 118 (17): pp. 267–270.

<sup>2</sup> NOAA IncidentNews. "IXTOC I." <<http://www.incidentnews.gov/incident/6250>>.

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<sup>3</sup> Teal, John M. and Robert W. Howarth. "Oil Spill Studies: A Review of Ecological Effects." *Environmental Management* 8(1), 27-44.

<sup>4</sup> Jernelov, Arne and Olof Linden. "Ixtoc I: A Case Study of the World's Largest Oil Spill." *Ambio*, 10(6), The Caribbean (1981), pp. 299-306. The drill lost circulation at a depth of about 3,625 meters.

<sup>5</sup> NOAA IncidentNews. "IXTOC I."

<sup>6</sup> NOAA IncidentNews. "Countermeasures/Mitigation: Bahia de Campeche, Mexico."  
<<http://www.incidentnews.gov/entry/508790>>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Teal and Howarth, 29. Also, Herbert, Paul J. "Atlantic Hurricane Season of 1979." NOAA Monthly Weather Review Vol. 108, pp. 973-990. See map on p. 975.

<sup>11</sup> Jernelov and Linden, p. 303. About 120,000 metric tons of oil, or 25 percent of the spilled oil, sank to the bottom of the Gulf.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304. About 30,000 metric tons of oil landed on Mexican beaches.

<sup>13</sup> NOAA Incident News. "Countermeasures/Mitigation: Bahia de Campeche, Mexico."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

<sup>16</sup> Jernelov and Linden, p. 306.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*