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Clean Air. Justice. Sustainability.

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“Hey, what are y’all picking up on the beach?”...

May 17, 2010 · [2 Comments](#)

By Shannon Dosemagen (shannon@labucketbrigade.org)

This was a question that we asked a number of different times this past Saturday. With the intention of mapping Dauphin Island, Alabama from the perspective of a kite, I set off with my co-worker Mariko and Tulane MPH students, Kris and Saira. We decided that instead of taking a boat out, we would travel the relatively short distance from New Orleans to coastal Alabama, driving Highway 90 that goes directly past the white sand beaches of Mississippi. I was particularly interested in taking this route as on May 12th, Governor Barbour had requested people to, “Come on down here and play golf, enjoy the beach, catch a fish and pay a little sales tax while you’re here.” ([Associated Press 5/14/10](#)). He also had commented that the oil slick was just an offshore sheen and that there wasn’t need for too much concern.

What we found was to the contrary. Although it was a slightly rainy day, there were still people out on the beaches and swimming in the Gulf (imagine if it had been one of the upper 80 degree days that we have this time of year). Just east of Pass Christian, we parked in front of a van that was stopped at one of the pull off areas as we had seen workers wearing plastic looking suits from a distance and were curious. The workers walking up from the beach wore translucent suits, gloves, plastic coverings over their boots, helmets and some carried bags with objects in them or were wearing life vests. We rolled down the window and asked the workers what they were carrying in the bags. After glances amongst each other, without a word they kept walking to their vehicle. Kris jumped out of the car and stated our question again, “what are you picking up on the beach?” At this point we were clearly told, “we aren’t allowed to answer questions or talk to you.” Luckily, there was one worker that hadn’t been with the other group and as he walked off the beach, we asked our questions again and finally got a response, “we’re just picking up and throwing away anything that looks like it has oil on it.” So to protect the image of Mississippi, we are being told that the oil spill is not affecting the coastline, yet I sat and watched as workers in full hazmat suits picked up debris (and who knows what else) while a woman, two men and four kids swam literally 250 feet away.



Workers coming off the beach
East of Pass Christian

We switched onto the 1-10 a bit farther up and headed towards Dauphin Island, Alabama. Upon reaching the beach area, we were greeted with a similar scenario, security forces, workers in hazmat boots and researchers combing the beach. The most we could get out of anyone as to what they were doing was a Polaris researcher (working with the USCG and ADEM) who said that there might be some tar balls at a southern point of the island and that they were just surveying the area to get an idea of the shoreline. Right down the beach however there were lines of clean-up crews working in formation to sweep the beach for what we assumed were oil covered objects. Sunbathers sat ten feet away or swam in the ocean. There was not a sign around to warn them that there could potentially be oil or dispersant in the water. We again posed our seemingly innocent question, “what are y’all doing here, why are there so many workers cleaning the beach?” To which a worker (finally one would talk to us without giving us the blank stare we became accustomed to) replied, “They are just picking up trash, you know water bottles, cigarettes and things...” We prompted, “Are they also picking up debris covered in oil?” to which the worker responded, “I don’t know anything about any oil.” This was the response as a crew worked its way towards us in full on protective gear including helmets and boots. I looked at my thin flip-flops and wondered why I hadn’t received the notice about wearing Gortex boots to the beach?



Workers survey the beach while sunbathers sit within feet of the clean up site

Can I pose the question, why is the clean up of the oil spill a secretive event that the workers are told they cannot talk about? We have a basic right to know if we are putting ourselves or our families in the way of an environmental hazard. We saw a tar ball on Dauphin, we know that the entire Gulf coast is going to be affected by the oil spill and we know that the seafood and tourism industry that the Gulf Coast relies on is in huge economic danger. The idea of what New Orleans a few years from now might be makes me anxious. Personally though, I want to know what is in the air that I breathe and the water that cools me off during summer months.

Categories: [BP Oil Spill](#)

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2 responses so far ↓



Jenny Steinman Heyden // [May 17, 2010 at 4:50 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

This is really important to know about – please keep up the good work!



Laura Bruederle // [May 17, 2010 at 5:21 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Not only does it scare the bejeezes out of me now... but what about all the sea life, and animal life and water (evaporation) that we and our children eat & drink in the coming months, let alone YEARS. What will the long term health effects will it have on all of us? All these unanswered questions that the goverment CAN'T and won't answer...

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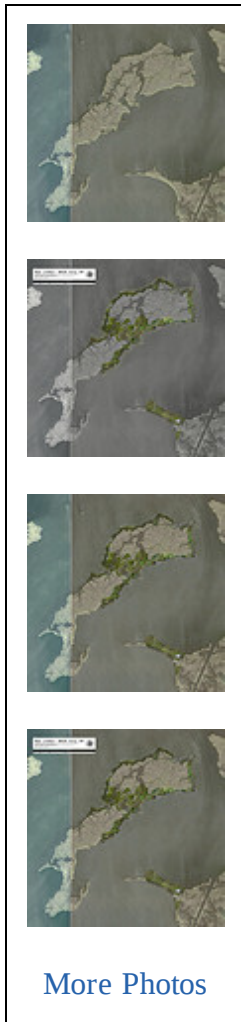
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