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Where Gulf Spill Might Place on the Roll of Disasters

By JUSTIN GILLIS

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From the Oval Office the other night, [President Obama](#) called the [oil](#) leak in the Gulf of Mexico “the worst environmental disaster America has ever faced.” Senior people in the government have echoed that language.

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Carson County Square House Museum

A scene in Kansas during the powerful dust storms that ravaged the Southern Plains from 1931 to 1939, as shown on PBS in the “American Experience” television series.

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The motive seems clear. The words signal sympathy for the people of the Gulf Coast, an acknowledgment of the magnitude of their struggle. And if this is really the worst environmental disaster, the wording seems to suggest, maybe people need to cut the government some slack for failing to get it under control right away.

But is the description accurate?

Scholars of environmental history, while expressing sympathy for the people of the gulf, say the assertion is debatable. They offer an intimidating list of disasters to consider: floods caused by human negligence, the destruction of forests across the entire continent and the near-extinction of the American bison.

“The White House is ignoring all the shades and complexities here to make a dramatic point,” said Donald E. Worster, an environmental historian at the [University of Kansas](#) and a visiting scholar at Yale.

The professors also note the impossibility of ranking such a varied list of catastrophes. Perhaps the worst disaster, they say, is always the one people are living through now.

Still, for sheer disruption to human lives, several of them could think of no environmental problem in American history quite equaling the calamity known as [the Dust Bowl](#).

“The Dust Bowl is arguably one of the worst ecological blunders in world history,” said Ted Steinberg, a historian at Case Western Reserve University.

Across the High Plains, stretching from the Texas Panhandle to the Dakotas, poor farming practices in the

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Four families, with 15 children among them, at an impromptu overnight road camp during the Dust Bowl in Texas.

early part of the 20th century stripped away the native grasses that held moisture and soil in place. A drought that began in 1930 exposed the folly.

Boiling clouds of dust whipped up by harsh winds buried homes and cars, destroyed crops, choked farm animals to death and sent children to the hospital with pneumonia. At first the crisis was ignored in Washington, but then the apocalyptic clouds began to blow all the way to New York, Buffalo and Chicago. A hearing in Congress on the disaster was interrupted by the arrival of a dust storm.

By the mid-1930s, people started to give up on the region in droves. The Dust Bowl refugees joined a larger stream of migrants displaced by agricultural mechanization, and by 1940 more than two million people had left the Great Plains States.

However, the Dust Bowl lasted a decade, and that raises an issue. What exactly should be defined as an environmental disaster? How long should an event take to play out, and

how many people have to be harmed before it deserves that epithet?

Among sudden events, [the Johnstown Flood](#) might be a candidate for worst environmental disaster. On May 31, 1889, heavy rains caused a poorly maintained dam to burst in southwestern Pennsylvania, sending a wall of water 14 miles downriver to the town of Johnstown. About 2,200 people were killed in one of the worst tolls in the nation's history.

At the time it happened, that event was understood as a failure of engineering and maintenance, and that is how it has come down in history. Perhaps a one-day flood is simply too short-term to count as an environmental disaster.

On the other hand, if events that played out over many decades are included, the field of candidates expands sharply.

Perhaps the destruction of the native forests of North America, which took hundreds of years, should be counted as the nation's largest environmental calamity. The slaughtering of millions of bison on the Great Plains might qualify.

Craig E. Colten, a geographer at Louisiana State University, nominates "the human overhaul of the Mississippi River Valley," which destroyed many thousands of acres of wetlands and made the region more vulnerable to later events like [Hurricane Katrina](#).

However, those activities were not seen as disasters at the time, at least by the people who carried them out. They were viewed as desirable alterations of the landscape. It is only in retrospect that people have come to understand what was lost, so maybe those do not belong on a disaster list.

Oil spills, too, seem to be judged more by their effect on people than on the environment. Consider [the Lakeview Gusher](#), which was almost certainly a worse oil spill, by volume, than the one continuing in the gulf.

In the southern end of California's San Joaquin Valley, an oil rush was on in the early decades of the 20th century. On March 14, 1910, a well halfway between the towns of Taft and Maricopa, in Kern County, blew out with a mighty roar.

It continued spewing huge quantities of oil for 18 months. The version of events accepted by the State of California puts the flow rate near 100,000 barrels a day at times. "It's the granddaddy of all gushers," said Pete Gianopulos, an amateur historian in the area.

The ultimate volume spilled was calculated at 9 million barrels, or 378 million gallons. According to the highest government estimates, the Deepwater Horizon spill is not yet half that size.

The Lakeview oil was penned in immense pools by sandbags and earthen berms, and nearly half was recovered and refined by the Union Oil Company. The rest soaked into the ground or evaporated. Today, [little evidence of the spill remains](#), and outside Kern County, it has been largely forgotten. That is surely because the area is desert scrubland, and few people were inconvenienced by the spill.

That sets it apart from the Deepwater Horizon leak. The environmental effects of the gulf spill remain largely unknown. But the number of lives disrupted is certainly in the thousands, if not the tens of thousands; the paychecks lost in industries like fishing add up to millions; and the ultimate cost will be counted in billions.

Even with all that pain, can it yet be called the nation's worst environmental disaster?

"My take," said William W. Savage Jr., a professor of history at the [University of Oklahoma](#), "is that we're not going to be able to tell until it's over."

Barclay Walsh contributed research.

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