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Environmentalists Use Oil Spill as a Rallying Cry

By KATE GALBRAITH

AUSTIN, Texas — The [oil spill](#) spreading through the Gulf of Mexico has been declared the worst environmental catastrophe ever in the United States. But for American environmentalists, the distress may also bring opportunity.

“As [Rahm Emanuel](#) says, a disaster is a terrible thing to waste,” said Zygmunt J.B. Plater, a law professor at [Boston College](#), paraphrasing a 2008 comment by the White House chief of staff about the then-burgeoning economic crisis. Environmentalists, for their part, are hoping that the country will pay more attention to green issues after seeing the devastation in the gulf.

Already, groups are using the spill as a rallying cry. Luke Metzger, the director of Environment Texas, said that his group’s canvassers had switched their fund-raising and petitions pitch from aiding a remote mountain range to urging an end to new [offshore drilling](#). (President [Barack Obama](#) has declared a six-month moratorium on deepwater drilling, though his administration is reopening shallower waters to new rigs.)

“Given that it’s the biggest environmental disaster in American history, it wasn’t that difficult a decision to really prioritize it,” Mr. Metzger said.

Another environmental group, American Rivers, is anticipating more attention to wetlands issues in general, even though oil was spilled into the sea, not rivers. “People are simply more tuned into environmental issues right now, especially when it comes to clean water,” said Amy Souers Kober, a spokeswoman for the group.

There is a flip side, however: other environmental causes could get starved of money and attention. For the past 50-plus days, the oil spill has dominated the headlines, the news programs and even the comedy shows across the United States (the comedian [Stephen Colbert](#) recently suggested that the Gulf of Mexico be renamed the Black Sea). Other issues could get overlooked.

The green section on the [Huffington Post](#) Web site recently asked its readers on [Twitter](#): “Do u miss the other stuff?” About 80 percent of the section’s coverage these days is devoted to the spill, it said.

Already, the United States has a reputation internationally as a laggard on many environmental issues. Treaties it has signed but never ratified include the Convention on Biological Diversity; the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants; the Rotterdam Convention, which relates to the use of pesticides and hazardous chemicals in international trade; and, of course, the Kyoto Protocol, signed by President [Bill Clinton](#) but spurned by President [George W. Bush](#) and the Senate.

The Obama administration has tried to tackle [climate change](#), but as for the other treaties, even if it were interested in moving forward, it would be tough because so much of the administration’s time is now consumed by the oil spill. From the public’s perspective, even pressing issues — like the International Whaling Commission’s coming vote on whether to allow some commercial whaling — have largely been lost in the noise.

Noah Sachs, an associate professor at the [University of Richmond](#) School of Law in Virginia and an expert in regulation of hazardous waste, said he had been hoping for movement on a bill in Congress that would overhaul and strengthen the 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act and allow the U.S. [Environmental Protection Agency](#) to control the use of some chemicals more tightly. So far, however, not much has happened. “I think the oil spill in the spring has deflected attention from that bill,” Mr. Sachs said.

In Texas, Mr. Metzger said that while the spill was important to focus on, “definitely the trade-off is putting less resources into some of the other issues we’re working on.”

In some ways, the relentless focus on the spill over the past two months has paralleled the constant attention to climate change over the past several years. In 2005, the [Sierra Club](#), a

leading American environmental group, decided to switch its attention more fully to climate, and most other groups have also increased their attention to the issue.

As with the oil spill, concerns have arisen that climate change has crowded out other causes. “As a conservation biologist I am continually frustrated by all the attention given to climate change by the media and politicians,” wrote Reed Noss, a professor at the [University of Central Florida](#), in the *Conservation Northwest Quarterly* in 2007. He urged a stronger focus on the fragmentation of wildlife habitats — in other words, humans’ habit of building houses or roads almost everywhere.

But climate change has the potential to affect just about everything — and it has conversely afforded a range of groups the opportunity to hitch their causes to the climate bandwagon. This has resulted in some odd pairings: for example, the magazine of the [Audubon Society](#), an American bird conservation group, has advocated “feed-in” tariffs, said John Farrell, a researcher with the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a U.S. group. Feed-in tariffs are a mainly European method of requiring utilities to pay above-market rates for electricity from solar panels and other green sources. They have nothing to do with birds, except insofar as clean energy can moderate climate change in a small way, thus helping to preserve habitats.

As for the spill in the gulf, Mr. Plater of Boston College suggests that it may become a “wake-up call” for environmental causes across the board. Mr. Plater should know: he spent two years heading the legal task force of the Alaska oil spill commission after the [Exxon Valdez](#) oil tanker disaster in 1989.

The gulf spill, he said, affects 100 times as many people as were affected in Alaska and has also devastated a far larger and more diverse economy. So whereas Alaska’s problems have been tough to keep in the forefront, Americans will not quickly forget what transpired in the gulf.

“Nobody’s talking right now about whales and [rain forests](#),” Mr. Plater said, “but what we are discovering is there is a huge economic backlash when environmental things go wrong.”