

# The Tyee

## *The Gulf Between Us*

A death down south. Denial up north. What a fisherman's despair says to us about oil.

*By: By Sarika Cullis-Suzuki, 8 July 2010, TheTyee.ca*

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Allen Kruse was a voice on the phone, the seventh fisherman I'd talked to that day. After completing my master's degree at the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre, I had accepted a contract to interview fishermen from Texas to Florida about reef fish bycatch. Some of the men were chatty, others less so. Kruse was particularly concise, our interview lasting only 14 minutes.

My interviews had begun face to face with fishermen in the Gulf. But the day I arrived in New Orleans, on April 20, the oil rig 'Deepwater Horizon,' licensed at the time to British Petroleum, exploded, killing 11; two days later, on Earth Day, as I boarded the plane from New Orleans back to Vancouver, calamity was flowing into the Gulf.

A week later, and still no one knew the extent of the damage. We didn't know the rate of oil pumping out of the leak; we didn't anticipate that the flow could not be stopped, that there would be no plan in place for when things went wrong.

Here in Canada, what little we did know we heard from the news: distorted, incomplete clips leaving us with many unanswered questions.

And so my interviews with fishermen continued, this time over the phone.

The conversations were straightforward, focusing on how the number of red snapper caught and thrown back in the Gulf as bycatch varied through the years. There were no questions about the oil spill as the survey was created pre-explosion, though the topic became hard to ignore.

Fifty-three days after I spoke with Kruse, he took his boat out for the last time and, with the gun he kept on board, took his own life.

### **Human face of an ecological catastrophe**

The CNN report said he had gone by the nickname "Rookie," which was also the name of his boat. His family reported that he "was stressed beyond belief by the effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf."

"For 14 days," CNN said, "Kruse had been using his boats to haul protective boom off of Alabama's shores, instead of captaining them on the hunt for snapper and amberjack. A charter boat fishing captain for 26 years, he -- like countless other Gulf fishermen -- found his passion and his career threatened by the undersea oil gusher."

According to the news report, Kruse "sent two of his deckhands on an errand before killing himself. He did not leave a note, and none of his friends suspected he would do something so extreme. 'He must have had his demons,' said Captain Bryan Watts."

This story shakes me, as I'm sure it does all who hear it. Yet for the most part, it seems the physical distance that separates us here in British Columbia from those in the Gulf has allowed us to become detached and blasé about coastal oil issues.

### **Bringing the story back home**

It is disturbing to think that we could in fact learn nothing from the Gulf disaster; that we could simply ignore the facts down south, disregard the suffering of all those affected, repeat their mistakes and claim ignorance. It is disrespectful, unethical and irresponsible.. and sadly, very possible: what is happening in the Gulf could happen to us too, right in our own backyards. And soon.

Enbridge is continuing to push their Northern Gateway Project. If passed, the Project means a pipeline bringing crude oil from our dirty tar sands in Alberta to the remote coastal community of Kitimat in B.C.; from there, that oil will be transported down through the treacherous Douglas Channel and out into the Pacific, and then over to Asia.

The First Nations people of the area warn of uncharted rocks and reefs along the proposed route, which would equate to a potential mine field for massive tankers with little maneuverability. This region is difficult to navigate, with or without millions of gallons of bitumen weighing you down. I won't even begin to list all that we have to lose when it comes to wildlife and wilderness and pristine ecosystems -- Exxon Valdez already did that for us. And then there's culture, jobs, health, history, diversity... all on the line.

With the consequence of government and big industry's calamitous mistake on display down south, we have no excuse. Enormous oil tankers roaming up and down our coast cannot be an option. It turns out the Gulf spill just reaffirms what we already knew. Queue the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster: are the people of Prince William Sound not still feeling the repercussions of that fateful event? Or the Queen of the North: have we already forgotten the 2006 crash when the ferry struck Gil Island in the Inside Passage? To this day, oil continues to seep into our waters as a result of these human failures.

### **Looking ahead at what might be lost**

Enbridge has just filed its regulatory application for the project, which means that it is now under review by the National Energy Board. What we must all understand is this: the Gateway Project is still just a proposal; there is no go ahead. Not yet. Apparently we have one shot left to reflect and act on what we really value, here, as British Columbians. Visit the [Dogwood Initiative](#) or [Friends of Wild Salmon](#) to stay informed about the project.

Clearly, oil, and our dependency on it, is a complex, not to mention uncomfortable topic. The most obvious irony being that we in North America depend on oil every day, and so an opposition to its manufacture or transport seems hypocritical. I am sure for those who live and work in the Gulf, this is no exception. But we must acknowledge the repercussions of past failures, and we must look ahead to see what we stand to lose; and then we can ask ourselves, if it's really worth it.

I wonder, if Allen Kruse were still alive today, what he would counsel.

After our interview in late April, when I asked Allen if I could contact him again with any further clarifying questions, he responded, in that characteristically southern style that I had so come to appreciate -- open, genuine and anachronistically polite. "Yes m'aam, call me anytime." [Tyee]

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