Is Offshore Drilling Worth the Environmental Risk of Spills?

In the wake of the Deepwater Horizon spill, governments around the world are double-checking spill response plans for their own marine areas and coastlines, particularly in areas of offshore drilling. But despite the catastrophic impact the spill may have on the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem, no government is taking steps to outlaw offshore drilling all together in its waters. The economic pressure against such a move is too great.

The Obama Administration in the US has placed a moratorium on deepwater drilling following the spill, but with a condition that it would be allowed again after steps are taken to improve spill prevention and mitigation. Italy voted in June to ban offshore drilling within 12 nm of its MPAs, but will continue to allow drilling outside those zones. In Canada, under proposed regulations for what is expected to be the nation’s first Arctic MPA, the government intends to allow limited exploration and development of petroleum inside the site’s boundaries (www.gazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p1/2010/2010-04-10/html/reg2-eng.html).

Assheton Carter formerly managed the Energy & Biodiversity Initiative (EBI), a partnership among several NGOs and energy companies to develop best practices for oil and gas development (http://theebi.org). Under Carter, the EBI produced a set of guidelines to help oil companies protect biodiversity through the entire span of offshore oil and gas operations. MPA News interviewed Carter for the May 2004 issue (“Mixing Oil and Water, Part I”), and spoke with him again this month following the Deepwater Horizon disaster. (Carter is now senior vice president of global engagement and strategy for Pact, an NGO that advances socially responsible development around the world.)

MPA News: Is offshore drilling worth the potential cost to the environment (including MPAs) of occasional massive spills?

Carter: Until we get serious about developing alternatives to oil, we must accept that events like the Deepwater Horizon blowout are, in fact, predictable occurrences in an era of “no more easy oil”. We can only continue to push for better operational and safety practices, tighter regulations, and more vigilant oversight of the oil industry.

MPA News: The EBI, of which BP was a member, developed good practices for preventing impacts on biodiversity from oil exploration and development, including practices for preventing and managing offshore spills. Did BP follow those practices?

Carter: Along with everyone else, I wait impatiently to get a clearer picture of why and how the spill happened. The EBI guidelines were designed for companies to integrate into their own environmental management systems, not to replace those systems. I believe that what we are witnessing at the Deepwater Horizon site is a system failure with devastating results. Operating guidelines, emergency plans, best practice manuals, and the like are available to all; however, the operating values and culture of a company determine its performance.

For more information:

Assheton Carter, Pact Inc., Washington, DC, US. E-mail: ACarter@pactworld.org