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ASSESSMENT OF THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT ON AVIFAUNA : CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE MANAGEMENT OF OILED BIRDS, DEAD OR ALIVE, DURING THE ERIKA OIL SPILL

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ABSTRACT

The national assessment of stranded birds and mortality (i.e. BNEMO in French, "*Bilan National des Échouages et de la Mortalité des Oiseaux*") is one of the studies financed within the scientific network of following up the consequences of the *Erika* oil spill. The BNEMO was very complex, especially because of the difficulty to centralize and check all the data available from 8 coastal administrative departments and coming from various sources. The total number of oiled birds (Nt) at sea and on the coastline is the sum of dead oiled birds disappeared at sea (N1), dead or alive oiled birds stranded on the coast (N2) and alive oiled birds which weren't stranded on the coast (N3). The total number of beached oiled birds (N2) is the sum of uncounted (N4) and effectively counted (N5) birds. Available quantitative (number of birds) and qualitative data (identified species and date of collection) mainly concern the component N5. If 65 species have been identified, 6 of them represent 95.5% of beached birds, of which 82.3% for the Common Guillemot. The toll is 77,000 oiled birds counted, of which 44,000 dead birds and 33,000 living birds (with 2150 birds successfully cleaned and released by rehabilitation centres). Considering more or less partial data, it is possible to evaluate the total number of uncounted beached oiled birds (N4), including corpses collected on the coast with the oiled waste removed during clean-up operations. The total would be 100 to 150,000 beached oiled birds (N2 = N4 + N5). The number of birds disappeared at sea (N1) can only be quantified by drift experiments of corpses, which haven't been possible to conduct in the present case. From published data on that topic, and taking into account the meteorological conditions after the wreck, the immediate impact would be around 150 to 300,000 birds killed.

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This estimation of a minimum global mortality ($N1 + N2$) appeared to be a very difficult exercise, due to the numerous uncertainties on available data and to the missing data needed to analyse some parameters. The total number of living and not stranded oiled birds ($N3$) is very difficult to assess. It includes numerous larids, shorebirds and waterfowls, oiled at various degrees on the shoreline without immediate mortality. Therefore, it is impossible to assess the total number of oiled birds (Nt). Without considering the particular aspect of bird rehabilitation, which is another topic, the BNEMO has highlighted some problems and gaps, linked to the management of dead or living oiled birds and to the gathering and the passing on of essential data for any quantitative and qualitative assessment. The massive oil spill undoubtedly constitutes the main explanation factor, with many thousands of birds stranded during a few weeks. The multiplicity of people involved in fieldwork and the low degree of dialogue and coordination are also the cause of many dysfunctions. Moreover, scientific support, essential in such case, has too frequently lacked. The elaboration of a “beached fauna” national action plan proves to be essential to allow, in the future, an immediate and relevant response in a similar situation of crisis.

