

# Preparedness and response to oiled wildlife incidents in Europe

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## Abstract

A professional oiled wildlife response would mean that, as part of the incident response system, an infrastructure and climate is created by which trained and dedicated wildlife responders can act quickly and efficiently according to a pre-defined strategy and in an integrated, coordinated and cost-efficient way.

Oil spill response planning is a responsibility that generally rests with national governments. However, outside of the United States, few existing response plans include a section on how to deal with oiled birds, mammals and reptiles. Because of this the rescue and rehabilitation of such animals is usually left to local wildlife groups that are not integrated into the main response organisation and which therefore lack the training and resources to mount a fully effective operation.

Making oiled wildlife response more professional is clearly an international challenge in which many key stakeholders, including governments, wildlife responders and the oil, shipping and response industries should cooperate.

Since 2000, Sea Alarm has taken a number of initiatives to this end, acting as an international, independent and impartial facilitator. Sea Alarm's approach is a one that aims at creating strategic alliances between key parties and facilitating transparent processes and activities towards a greater preparedness at national, regional and international levels.

Among the achievements of the last five years is an active network of oiled wildlife responders across Europe, consisting of coastal rehab groups, vets, scientists, universities and national NGO's. At a global level, the International Alliance of Oiled Wildlife Responders has been set up by leading organisations, providing a platform for exchange of expertise and experience and the development of practical standards and guidelines. In cooperation with IPIECA, guidelines for oiled wildlife response planning have been developed. This informative document (No. 13 in the IPIECA Report Series) is currently used in a number of European countries that are in the process of developing national oiled wildlife response plans.

Thanks to the strong support of the oil industry, Sea Alarm is now giving increased attention to the development of global preparedness. This major project, carried out in close cooperation with OSRL/Global Alliance, aims at developing country preparedness profiles, an international resources database, a 24/7 emergency response centre for oiled wildlife incidents, improvement of international expert response capability, corporate wildlife response plans and training programmes for oil spill managers and oiled wildlife responders.

These, and other activities carried out by Sea Alarm at both the national and international level, all aim to improve the response to future spills that involve marine wildlife: more cooperation, better coordination, professional approaches, best techniques and cost efficiency. The benefits should be enormous, not least for marine birds, mammals and reptiles vulnerable to oil pollution.

## Introduction

The seasonal appearance of oiled birds is a well known phenomenon for coastal rehabilitators in many parts of the world, especially in places where important bird areas are located close

to busy shipping routes. Over the course of many years and driven by trial and error, many of these coastal centres have developed a respectable expertise in the washing and subsequent rehabilitation and release of oiled animals. In the different coastal countries of Europe a rich variety of methodologies has been developed in relative isolation and put into practice by rehab centres in the winter season more or less on a day-to-day basis. Only a few of these methodologies have been developed scientifically and in most cases it is not known how successful they really are in terms of release and post-release survival rates. This is simply because data have never been systematically collected or analysed. Many of the applied techniques have not been put on paper and only exist as routine operations by those people who developed them. Professional, science-based protocols are available from a number of groups in the world, such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA, UK), Tristate Bird Rescue Research Centre (Tristate, Delaware, USA), International Bird Rescue and Research Center (IBRRC, California, USA) and the Oiled Wildlife Care Network (OWCN, California, USA). These can be qualified as successful methods.

Larger oiled wildlife incidents are the kind of events in which different local and international rehab centres need to cooperate because the number of affected animals is beyond the capacity of a local rehab centre. This is where a lot of problems normally become apparent. Many groups may appear on site, each offering to take a number of casualties which are then treated according to the standards of that group. In the absence of any form of central coordination, nobody knows exactly which groups are active, what they are doing, how many birds are taken from the beaches, where and how they are treated, how many birds die during treatment, or how many are released. In the heat of the response, groups sometimes accuse each other of not treating animals well, not passing on information, claiming all the credits for the operation in the media without mentioning groups that are also involved, raising funds through media campaigns but not sharing these monies with other groups, etcetera. In such uncoordinated efforts, resources are far from being optimally used and many animals do not receive the best possible treatment despite all the good intentions of the groups and volunteers that are involved. The result is that only a fraction of the total number of rescued birds can be released.

Some incident responses however demonstrate that, provided the right conditions are created, an oiled wildlife rehabilitation effort can be successful, with high release rates and convincing proof of post-release survival. For example, the *Treasure* incident in 2000 in South Africa demonstrated that a response operation involving thousands of volunteers can be organised in such a way that over 20,000 live animals (African Penguins) could be successfully treated and released. Also smaller incidents that were centrally coordinated according to pre-spill arrangements demonstrated satisfying results. The key issue seems to be that an oiled wildlife response has the best probability of success if pre-spill arrangements for its coordination and management are in place, the right resources can be mobilised, and the right methodologies are applied.

Sea Alarm is a Brussels based international organisation which has been set up by European wildlife responders to improve international preparedness for oiled wildlife incidents and build bridges towards authorities and industry. Increasingly Sea Alarm has developed as an independent and impartial facilitator, aiming to involve and work with all parties and organisations that could make contribution to a professional oiled wildlife response.

## **Achievements so far**

### ***European network***

Since its establishment in 1999, Sea Alarm has been working to set up a European cooperative network of marine wildlife responders. This network now includes over 150 contacts in 18 European coastal countries. This network is regularly informed about Sea Alarm's activities and allows fast mobilisation of people and/or equipment in the case of an emergency. Sea Alarm is actively seeking to facilitate closer contact and cooperation between the various members of this network through initiatives such as newsgroups and information exchange programmes.

## **Oiled wildlife incident involvements**

To date, Sea Alarm has been involved in four incidents, including the *Jessica* (Galapagos, 2001), the *Prestige* (Spain, 2002), the *Tricolor* (Belgium, 2003) and most recently the Estonia spill (Estonia, 2006 - see Box with a case study). In each of them, Sea Alarm has acted as a facilitator, and worked with the authorities and local responders to improve communication, set up a centrally coordinated response and to make available international expertise. On each of its involvements, Sea Alarm has written a report, not only to describe its own response activities, but also to evaluate and identify lessons learnt.

### **Box: Oiled wildlife incident Estonia (case study)**

Thursday February 2, 2006, Sea Alarm was notified about an oiled wildlife incident that was currently happening in Estonia. Thousands of birds were oiled following an illegal discharge of fuel oil in the Gulf of Finland. Local responders had called for assistance, and the message reached Sea Alarm by e-mail via organisations in Sweden and the UK.

Sea Alarm immediately liaised with the local responders the International Fund for Animal Welfare's Emergency Relief Team (IFAW ER, US) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty against Animals (RSPCA, UK) and the three organisation set up a joint International effort to provide support to the Estonian response. Within 24 hours, Sea Alarm and IFAW were on site, advising and assisting the authorities and local responders, while experts from Europe and other parts in the world were mobilised. Experts who arrived were sent to the remote bird holding centres to assist with animal care while a temporary wildlife hospital was built, using IFAW's Southampton based equipment which was put on transport by OSRL. As soon as this hospital was operational (February 8), all birds were transported there to bring them under one roof. This marked the transition from emergency management to project management. From the ca 500 birds that had been captured, ca 150 made it to the wildlife hospital, of which ca 100 were considered fit enough to be treated. Also the birds that had been collected dead on the beach were brought to the wildlife hospital for necropsy, to collect data for a wildlife impact analysis. A training programme was designed to train a core group of managers, rangers, volunteers and scientists who would form a national crisis team for a future incident. Together with the authorities, a response plan was developed to prepare for spring 2006, when the spilled oil would be recovered in a clean-up operation.

The approach jointly taken by Sea Alarm, IFAW and RSPCA in this response can be seen as a milestone in the history of European wildlife response, marking the start of a new era of effective, cost efficient cooperation between experienced wildlife responders. This spill again demonstrated the need of local preparedness and the importance of existing pre-spill arrangements between the key players from the authorities and NGO's. Also it draw attention to the fact that illegal discharges from ships leave a gap in the liability and compensation schemes: so long as no responsible party has been identified, all organisations that were involved in the oiled wildlife response will have to pay for their own expenses.

## **Wildlife Alliance**

The International Alliance of Oiled Wildlife Responders (the "Wildlife Alliance") is an association in which the world's leading oiled wildlife responders work together. The objective is to define and promote "good practices" and make these standards available to wildlife responders, governments and industry. Sea Alarm is one of the founding members of the Wildlife Alliance, together with organisations such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), IBRRC, Tristate, RSPCA and UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine (California, US).

## **Guide to Oiled Wildlife Response Planning**

In cooperation with the International Petroleum Industry Environmental Association (IPIECA), Sea Alarm coordinated the development and production of a Guide to Oiled Wildlife Response Planning, which appeared as Volume 13 in IPIECA's Report Series on Oil Spill Planning and Response. This Guide, which has been welcomed as the world standard on the subject, was developed and written by a large number of oiled wildlife response experts from different parts of the world, supported by oil spill response experts from the oil industry. Increasingly, the Guide is being used by authorities and industry to plan for oiled wildlife response. In Europe, the Guide was used in the development of the Belgian oiled wildlife response plan, and currently is being used to draft a similar plan for the Netherlands.

## ***Third Sea Alarm Conference 2004***

As with earlier conference in 2000 and 2001, the Third Sea Alarm Conference was organised to allow European stakeholders to help define the priorities for Sea Alarm's activities. The conference, which was held in Balbriggan, Ireland in November 2004, was attended by representatives from government authorities, wildlife responders and different branches of industry. Together they discussed the path forward towards greater European preparedness for oiled wildlife response, and agreed upon the text of a declaration (see Box: Balbriggan Declaration).

### Box: Balbriggan Declaration

Marine wildlife knows no national boundaries and the welfare of birds and sea mammals in the event of a spill is the responsibility of all countries. It is also a primary interest to the media, often influencing the public's perception of the effectiveness of the government's response. Within Europe, wildlife response usually relies on the dedication of individuals and volunteer groups within the local community. However, these often lack the resources and, in some cases, the experience, to mount a prompt response by themselves.

To improve this situation **the conference strongly urges that:**

1. Plans for wildlife response should be developed and integrated into existing local, national and regional contingency plans and arrangements for responding to spills of oil and other substances within European waters
2. The *IPIECA Guide for Wildlife Response Planning* (IPIECA Report Series Volume 13) should be distributed widely to government agencies responsible for pollution response, nature conservation and environmental protection, as well as to relevant international and regional organisations (e.g. the IMO, European Commission, Bonn Agreement, Helsinki Agreement) to ensure that this topic is addressed as a matter of urgency.
3. The Guide should also be made available to wildlife groups within the local community who are key players in oil spill response, to encourage a higher level of pre-planning, and to facilitate cooperation and assistance by other national and international groups in a major incident.
4. The experiences of wildlife responders should be widely communicated:
  - In detail, to ensure that lessons learned are shared, and
  - In summary, to increase the level of attention and understanding given to this topic throughout Europe.
5. The Sea Alarm Foundation is well placed to facilitate the above development as a consequence of its excellent links with national wildlife response groups within Europe, with international animals welfare organisations (e.g. IFAW), international industry organisations (e.g. IPIECA, ITOPF, OSRL/EARL Global Alliance, P&I Clubs) and intergovernmental organisations (e.g. IMO, IOPC Funds, European Commission).

Done at Balbriggan,  
Wednesday November 3, 2004

## ***Cooperation with the Oil Industry***

In October 2005 Sea Alarm and the OSRL/EARL Global Alliance signed an agreement which will provide the basis for long-term cooperation between the two organisation in the field of international oiled wildlife preparedness and response. The joint programme developed between Sea Alarm and the OSRL/EARL Alliance includes:

- training and co-ordination of dedicated wildlife response teams, as well as responders in individual companies, countries and regions;
- establishment of a 24/7 emergency response centre;
- activities to increase the level of international preparedness to oiled wildlife incidents, including the incorporation of wildlife response plans into national oil spill contingency plans;
- development of an international database of wildlife response organisations, national authorities and other relevant country information;
- centrally stored oiled wildlife response equipment.

## **The future: Preparedness in Europe**

In accordance with the conclusions of the Third Sea Alarm Conference (see Box 1), but also following the aims of wildlife responders throughout Europe, Sea Alarm aims to establish a situation in Europe whereby:

- an oil spill of any size involving wildlife can be dealt with efficiently and professionally by local and, if necessary, external responders;
- national and local authorities are aware of the need to prepare for an integrated oiled wildlife response and have established sound oiled wildlife contingency plans;
- the oil producing and transporting industries are also participating in maintaining an adequate level of preparedness in Europe and elsewhere;
- oiled wildlife responders have developed a common approach as to how they might work together effectively at national and/or international levels in the complex situation of an oiled wildlife emergency. They have also agreed upon a set of common approaches (including protocols) by which they are technically prepared to respond professionally to an oiled wildlife incident;
- professional oil spill responders within governments and industry are familiar with, and involved in, the continuous development and planning of adequate and professional oiled wildlife response models, and apply them as an integrated part of the oil spill contingency plan.

## **Current European activities**

### ***Projects co-funded by the European Commission***

Three project proposals were submitted to the European Commission following the 2005 Call for Proposals in the field of Accidental and Deliberate Marine Pollution. They have all been selected and approved by the Commission and will be carried out in the course of 2006 and 2007.

#### European response plan

This project aims at bringing European authorities together in a workshop to discuss past experiences in oiled wildlife incidents and to look at strategies to be better prepared for future incidents at national and European levels. The pilot project will collect relevant information and make that available through a dedicated website that will be set up as part of the Community Information System. This project will be carried out by a consortium of Sea Alarm (lead, B), CEDRE (F), IFAW (UK), ICRAM (I), SYKE (Fin), ITOPF (UK) and OSRL (UK).

#### Best practices for oiled wildlife rehabilitation

This project aims at bringing together "hands-on" oiled wildlife responders from European Coastal States to discuss principles and methodology of cleaning and rehabilitating oiled birds and other marine species. Two days of training will be part of the workshop. This project, which will result in a handbook of agreed principles, methodologies and references, will be carried out by Zoomarine (lead, P), Sea Alarm (B), IFAW (UK) and ICRAM (I).

Handbook on scientific data collection and impact assessment

This proposal aims to develop guidelines for scientific data collection and analysis in the aftermath of an oiled wildlife incident in order to arrive at a commonly agreed methodology for a wildlife impact assessment as an integrated part of the overall oil spill response. This project, which aims at bringing together European seabird scientists, will be carried out by the Royal NIOZ (NL), Sea Alarm (B) and the University of A Coruña (E).

### ***Some in-country activities***

Sea Alarm supports different in-country activities in order to arrive at national cooperation between wildlife responders and their governments, ideally resulting in a national oiled wildlife response plan. Sea Alarm has already supported such a process in Belgium in 2004 which resulted in a national wildlife response plan (see paper by K. Belpaeme in this volume).

#### Germany

Sea Alarm was invited by some German wildlife responders to act as a facilitator and impartial chairman in a series of meetings to discuss a higher degree of preparedness in Germany. Whereas the first meeting only involved wildlife groups, the initiative caught the interest of several national and regional authorities and has grown into a truly national process aimed at defining strategies and approaches to deal with future oiled wildlife incidents.

#### Netherlands

Sea Alarm has encouraged the competent authorities in the Netherlands to consider developing an oiled wildlife response plan and was involved in discussions with the two most involved departments in the design of a process. Currently, a plan is being developed which will be based on the principles of the IPIECA Guidelines and on the example of the Belgian plan. The five Dutch oiled bird response centres have asked Sea Alarm to assist them in bringing forward their interests in the development of the national response plan, and to help them develop a common high standard animal treatment protocol based on internationally available guidelines for "best practices".

#### Ireland

Sea Alarm was invited to a meeting of Irish coastal counties, the Irish Coast Guard and the Parks and Wildlife Service where a strategy was discussed on how to develop an appropriate level of oiled wildlife response preparedness in Ireland, where coastal counties are responsible for shoreline cleanup. Under the direction of the Coast Guard they are now developing their own local incident response plans. Oiled wildlife response is one of the issues that needs to be addressed in these plans. Further steps in Ireland will involve those NGO stakeholders that could make a contribution to a coordinated oiled wildlife response.

### **General and international activities**

As part of the Sea Alarm – OSRL/EARL Global Alliance cooperation, a number of activities will be carried out, also contributing to a higher level of preparedness in Europe.

#### Sea Alarm's Emergency and information centre

As of February 2006, Sea Alarm will operate a 24/7 emergency centre, which can be approached in case of an acute need for advice or assistance. The centre will have direct access to wildlife response groups and experts, and will be able to mobilise people and equipment, liaise with industry organisations and insurance companies. Through the involvement of this centre, a better coordination and cooperation of efforts and activities can be achieved.

#### Training of wildlife responders

Sea Alarm is working closely with the Wildlife Alliance partners to develop and organise training courses in various regions in the world, including Europe where many wildlife response groups have expressed a high level of interest. Dialogue has started with potential sponsors of these training events. Some important first steps in the development of the

training modules will be taken in the framework of the projects that are co-financed by the European Commission.

#### Extending the pool of expertise

The international pool of experts who are capable of organising, managing and assisting in an oiled wildlife response is rather limited. Sea Alarm, in cooperation with OSRL/EARL and members of the Wildlife Alliance, will select and train a core group of wildlife responders who will join and extend the present international pool of expertise. The aim is to involve leading wildlife responders from European Countries in this core group who then will be able to share their gained knowledge in their own country of residence. This new generation of trained oiled wildlife responders will have the opportunity to get involved in future incidents in Europe or elsewhere and work under the guidance of experienced groups.

#### Industry contingency planning

Through the production and publication of the IPIECA Guide to Oiled Wildlife Response Planning in 2004 and recently, the agreement between Sea Alarm and OSRL/EARL Global Alliance, the oil industry has recognised the need to include oiled wildlife preparedness and response as an integrated element of their overall oil spill contingency planning programme. For many oil companies this will mean that they will devote considerable effort to develop oiled wildlife response plans for their relevant operations. Sea Alarm will work closely with OSRL/EARL to provide consultancy services in this field.

#### Stocks of oiled wildlife response equipment

The OSRL/EARL Global Alliance maintains a considerable amount of oil combating equipment, principally at warehouses in Southampton, UK and Singapore. Selected oiled wildlife response equipment will be added to these stocks, which will mean that mobilisation of professional equipment can be undertaken without delay at any time if needed.

#### Database

As part of an on-going project, a country wildlife profile database will be developed which will include the critical details of the state of preparedness of all coastal countries or regions in the world. The database will provide contact details of the leading authorities, local wildlife response centres and their response capacities, and the key elements of a national wildlife response plan, if available. The information in this database will be used by Sea Alarm's emergency response centre, but also made available to the OSRL/EARL Global Alliance, and key organisations such as ITOFF.

#### A response fund

Funding can be a problem in the early days of an oiled wildlife response as it often takes a few days to a couple of weeks before budgets become available. Sea Alarm is working to identify parties who might be prepared to contribute to an emergency fund if required under certain circumstances. The feasibility of a permanent oiled wildlife fund will also be investigated.

#### Communication

The Sea Alarm website ([www.sea-alarm.org](http://www.sea-alarm.org)) will be continuously extended with information on current projects and internationally available key information. A pilot website on contingency planning and response has been developed ([www.sea-alarm/planning](http://www.sea-alarm/planning)) and will be further developed in the course of 2006 as part of the EU projects. Newsletters will be regularly produced to inform stakeholders about progress and new projects or initiatives.

#### Conferences

Following the success of the Third Sea Alarm Conference in Balbriggan, Ireland, the Fourth Sea Alarm Conference will be held in the second half of 2007 in Ostend, Belgium. The event aims to bring representatives from European authorities, wildlife responders and industry together in a three-day event. The conference will evaluate the current state of preparedness in Europe, and identify key areas that require action.

Whereas the Ninth Effects of Oil on Wildlife Conference will be held in 2007 in California, Sea Alarm aims to bring the Tenth event to Europe in 2009. This important international event brings together oiled wildlife responders, authorities and industry representatives.

## **Conclusions**

A broad range of national and international activities have been identified by which the preparedness of Europe to deal effectively with a future oiled wildlife incident will be increased. These activities will involve the world's leading international and local oiled wildlife responders, vets and scientists, the oil and shipping industries and the competent authorities of Europe's coastal countries. These authorities have a crucial role to play at their respective national levels to assess the need for an oiled wildlife response plan and to work with their local wildlife groups to develop the most appropriate strategy and operational plan. Care for oiled wildlife is not the single and most important aspect of an oil spill response, but the issue has been ignored for too long. Now that all the international key actors have joined forces, an interesting and promising programme of activities has been set up and is ready to take off. If the competent authorities in Europe join these efforts and provide the necessary support, Europe will witness some significant progress over the next few years.