



MARK CARWARDINE WILD THOUGHTS

I know I had a rant about big oil companies in the last issue of *BBC Wildlife*, but having just returned from making a film about the Gulf oil spill with Stephen Fry, I'm afraid that there's a lot more to complain about.

I returned from Louisiana in shock. Unable or unwilling to skim much oil from the surface of the sea, BP appears to have poured its energy into skimming up its detractors and, as a consequence, we found it staggeringly hard to find anyone prepared to criticise the oil giant.

BP has made locals happy by chartering nearly every boat on the coast and renting most of the hotel rooms; indeed, some fishermen and hoteliers told us that they are earning more this year than ever before. Meanwhile, scientists and conservation groups, flush with generous funding, were claiming that the problem isn't really so bad after all and doggedly reciting what became an all-too-familiar line: "BP isn't the enemy."

Well, I'm afraid I'm not buying it.

When the Deepwater Horizon exploded, BP had a choice: let the oil float to the surface, where it could be skimmed off but where the world could see the full extent of the damage, or pump the Gulf full of dispersants – chemicals whose impact on the environment is not yet completely understood – to keep it out of sight. It chose the latter, pumping 1.8m gallons of dispersants into the sea in a vast, uncontrollable chemistry experiment.

Suddenly, we were being told that 75 per cent of the oil had "gone". But the oil hasn't miraculously disappeared – it's either been dispersed or is unaccounted for, which are completely different things.

In fact, the only thing that has gone is the international pressure on BP and the US Government. And that, of course, has nothing to do with an efficient clean-up operation and everything to do with a Kafkaesque PR exercise.

Here is the truth: the real extent of the damage is simply unknowable at this stage and may not be known for many years. Anyone who says otherwise is either naïve or lying.



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