

By Jason Mark
Illustration by Peter Kuper

Disaster on the Half Shell



PETE VUJNOVICH REMEMBERS exactly where he was when he first heard about the Deepwater Horizon blowout—or, more accurately, when he didn't hear much about it. On April 21, Vujnovich, a fifty-year-old oysterman from Port Sulphur, Louisiana, was driving up to the town of Alexandria in his 2006 white Chevy 4x4 pickup to watch his son, Cullen, play first base in an LSU baseball game. The news on the radio was all about a freak storm that had just flooded Nashville. The explosion and sinking of the offshore drilling platform that had occurred the day before—and the death of eleven workers—got only a quick mention in the headlines.

"I didn't think nothing of it—it's 130 miles from my [oyster] bedding grounds," he told me when I visited him at his dock on a steamy Monday afternoon in June. "I thought: 'What a tragedy that those guys lost their lives.' I assumed [BP] had the capability and

Jason Mark is a co-author of "Building the Green Economy: Success Stories from the Grassroots." He is the editor of Earth Island Journal and a co-manager of Alemany Farm in San Francisco.

the technology to deal with this."

A month later, Vujnovich learned in a personal way that the oil giant BP did not, in fact, have the capacity to shut down the undersea gusher. "Overnight they closed me down, and 100 percent of the area I used to harvest is closed to me," he says.

Normally, Vujnovich would be out on the water in June, but because of the fisheries closure he was spending the day making repairs ("a ten-year refurbishing," he called it) on one of his two boats.

"May 22 was the last day I shipped oysters, and on May 23 I was all shut down," he says. "This is my only source of income—since I was eight or ten years old, my weekends and summers were spent on the boat. What's weighing on me right now, it's also shut down my son's and nephew's college money for the year."

The closure of a third of Gulf fisheries has put shrimpers and other fishermen out of work or else forced them to take oil cleanup jobs. Native American communities in southern Louisiana that rely on fishing to keep food on the table are threatened with hunger. And then there's the damage to the region's unique ecosystems. The BP blowout has sent waves of oil into the fragile saltwater marshes of the Mississippi Delta—which account for 40 percent of the United States' wetlands. Hundreds of birds and scores of dolphins have died. Vast plumes of oil in the ocean's water column, along with the toxics in the chemical dispersants used to remediate the spill, could turn much of the sea into a dead zone. One marine biologist compared the possible effect to detonating an underwater neutron bomb.

Among the human victims of the spill, perhaps no group will be harmed more than the gulf's oystermen. Oyster farmers are unlike other fishermen who make their living from the sea in that their product has no way of moving out of the way of the oil spill. Oysters, after all, aren't

caught; they're raised. The bivalves demand very specific conditions to grow, places where the water temperature is just right and the mix of salt water and fresh water just so. It can take an oyster farmer years to form a perfect bed for cultivating the animals. Now, many of those beds are being destroyed. The all-too-common refrain that the spill has jeopardized "an entire way of life" is especially true for those families who have spent generations building oyster beds along the rim of the Gulf Coast.

"I've been doing this all my life, and my father and grandfather did it," Vujnovich says. Beyond paying his son's college tuition, he worries about keeping up the mortgage on his boats and covering what he calls "a pretty big debt." It's been a shock for Vujnovich, an easygoing fellow with a James Carville-like grin, to see oil on his acreage and to feel like his fate is out of his control. "When I see the sheen, or in some places, the crude, it brings it home," he says. "I thought I would be safe in my little Barataria Bay estuary, but it's coming further than I ever thought it would."

Corporate and government responses to the spill have created additional risks. The millions of gallons of chemical dispersants that BP sprayed in the Gulf threaten to poison the oysters. In June, the Army Corps of Engineers opened up some of its floodgates on the Mississippi River in an effort to push the oil back to sea, and the flush of freshwater killed thousands of acres of oysters, which require brackish conditions. Because it takes three to four years for an oyster to reach maturity, the oil spill will impact oyster farmers through 2014, if not longer.

"They turned on the freshwater on the east side of the river to combat the oil, so they killed all our seed over there," says Matt Lepetich, an oyster farmer in Empire, Louisiana. "It's all dead. I had three leases over there, that's 106 acres. I had 80,000 sacks of seeds, and it's 100 percent mortality."

Like many of the people I spoke

with during my time in Louisiana, Lepetich has a straightforward explanation for what caused the BP blowout: "Greed. It's the epitome of greed." When I spoke with him in June, he was especially frustrated by BP's delays in processing his compensation claims. "I built my life on working, and now I'm not working," he said. "They stopped my life, and now they don't want to pay for my life."

The destruction of the oyster beds has had a ripple throughout the seafood economy. Forty percent of the oysters consumed in the United States come from Louisiana, and there's a whole network of processors, shippers, and wholesalers who've taken a beating along with the farmers.

One of those companies is P&J Oyster in New Orleans, a family-run business that's something of an institution in the French Quarter. For 134 years, P&J has been supplying oysters to some of the city's top restaurants, such as Galatoire's and Arnaud's. That tradition came to an abrupt end—or at least an indefinite interruption—on June 11, when the company stopped shucking Louisiana oysters because there were none to be had. The company was forced to lay off most of its twenty-five employees and give them the phone number for BP compensation claims.

"We have people that have worked together for generations," said Al Sunseri, who, along with his brother, Sal, inherited the company from his father and grandfather. "After this week . . ." There was a long pause as Al gathered his thoughts. "We don't know when we'll be open again."

When I returned to P&J Oyster eight days later to see how they were doing, the Sunseri brothers were meeting with their accountants and attorneys to plot out a survival plan, but the warehouse was dead. No one was working the shucking tables; a pair of delivery trucks that normally would be on the road sat idly across the street. Along one wall stood a line of a dozen handcarts, empty and unmanned. ♦