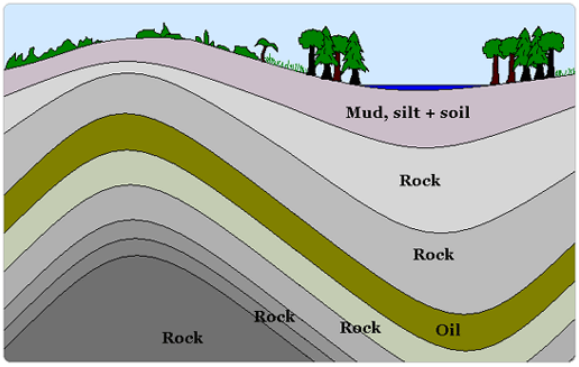
Between a Rock and a Hard Place

On 20 April life on board the deep water oil-drilling rig, 'Deepwater Horizon' suddenly changed. Crews were alternately working on the drilling gear on deck, sleeping or watching videos while awaiting their change of shift. Suddenly, the sky around turned fire-red as a tongue of flame leapt up from the ocean floor below and engulfed the rig. Immediately, crude oil, crushed into existence thousands of years ago, was suddenly released into the sea at the staggering rate of one and a half million gallons of oil a day. Thus began a survival drama that is still with us today.

From the first, it was clear that the ecological damage was going to be of epic proportion. No oil tanker pouring its deadly cargo of crude oil into the sea could compare with the prospects facing BP, the company responsible for the drilling. This oil-field is a seemingly inexhaustible supply, in which one and a half million gallons of crude is pouring daily into the sea. The ecological impact of the oil slick was enough to cause US President Obama to take personal charge of the disaster. Since then, the original conservative estimate by BP as to the amount of oil escaping daily from the well has now been upwardly revised by the American government department monitoring the resulting oil slick being produced at a staggering one and a half million gallons of crude a day.

All efforts to staunch the flow of oil from the bore hole which reaches nearly another 4 miles into the earth's crust have failed. BP, who commissed the deepwater rig until the year 2013, has come under increasing pressure from the American public in the shape of President Obama who is facing increasing personal criticism for his handling of the disaster. Investors and particularly Pensions Scheme investors, will continue to monitor the company's efforts both to plug the flood of oil gushing forth from the depths and to fund the full cost of the clean-up operation which is threatening the coasts of the southern states of America.

The disaster began a mile below on the sea bed below when a huge sheet of fire leapt upwards and engulfted the rig. None of the automatic panic shut-down systems had time to operate, such was the speed of the blow-out. By the time the fire rose to the ocean surface, there was no time for anything. The explosion, caused by tremendous pressure from deep in the earth below was, it is thought, the result of the bore drilling into a pocket of oil at such pressure that it tore open all the safety valves, leaving the rig helpless in a sea of flame while crude oil with the consistency of tar began to spew out of the ruptured bore hole a mile below.



The huge financial cost of the disaster is only a part of the true cost. The immediate concern facing the American people is the threat to the livelihoods of those living along the coasts of the southern states. Fishing of all kinds and tourism could effectively be killed off, leaving those relying on these economies to face financial ruin. The wider problem may yet be of global proportion. The gas, methane, is one of the worst of the greenhouse gases which, when mixed with air, constitutes a global warming agent far exceeding that of carbon dioxide.

The question facing not just BP, the American government and perhaps even the wider world is: how quickly can this hole in the sea bed be plugged? So far, attempts to seal the hole have proved unsuccessful and may have been further hampered if the wrecked structure of the mighty sunken oil rig if it sits astride the hole. Any attempt to plug the original bore hole with its pressurized mix of crude oil and methane pouring out, would be like trying to put a cork into a bottle of fizzing lemonade; the cork would simple be blown back. The strategy, was to drill a hole that would intersect the main hole and create a structure reminiscent of the branch of a tree meeting the main trunk. Through this branch, a heavy liquid could, it was hoped, be pumped to create a seal within the main bore. All attempts to effect this kind of repair have failed.

The only other solution suggested by one analyst is that of placing a bomb in just the right place near the hole in the hope that this will melt the rock structure and effect a seal after the molten rock has re-solidified. However, such a solution is highly risky. The other difficulty would be the calculation of the size of the explosive charged needed. Anything too small and the whole problem could become worse; but the fear of any under calculation might suggest a bomb of such magnitude so as to resemble a nuclear warhead.

The problem is not going to just go away. Each one of the 40,000 barrels of oil escaping from the drill hole contains enough oil to contaminate daily 35 million gallons of sea water. This means – if US experts' estimates of the scale of the leak are correct - that 1400 million gallons of sea water is being contaminated each single day since this disaster began 2 months ago.

Has this single event the signs of a global disaster of un-thought of proportion?

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