

Shell Game in the Arctic

How to Bring the Major Oil Companies Ashore and Halt the Destruction of Our Oceans

by [Subhankar Banerjee](#) Published on Thursday, August 2, 2012 by [TomDispatch.com](#)

When you go to the mountains, you go to the mountains. When it's the desert, it's the desert. When it's the ocean, though, we generally say that we're going "to the beach." Land is our element, not the waters of our world, and that is an unmistakable advantage for any oil company that wants to drill in pristine waters.

Take Shell Oil. Recently, the company's drill ship, the fabulously named Noble Discoverer, [went adrift](#) and almost grounded in Dutch Harbor, Alaska. That should be considered an omen for a distinctly star-crossed venture to come. Unfortunately, few of us are paying the slightest attention.

Shell is getting ready to drill for oil in the Arctic Ocean, an ecosystem staggeringly rich in life of every sort, and while it's not yet quite a done deal, the prospect should certainly focus our minds. But first, it's worth reminding ourselves of the mind-boggling richness of the life still in our oceans.

Last month began with a once-in-a-lifetime sighting in Monterey Bay, California, startlingly close to shore, of blue whales. Those gigantic mammals can measure up to 100 feet, head-to-tail, and weigh nearly 200 tons -- the largest animal by weight ever to have lived on this planet. Yes, even heavier than dinosaurs. The biggest of them, *Amphicoelias fragillimus*, is estimated to have weighed 122 tons, while the largest blue whale came in at a whopping 195 tons.

The recent Monterey Bay sighting is being [called](#) "the most phenomenal showing of th[os]e endangered mammals in recent history." On July 5th alone, the Monterey Bay Whale Watch reported sightings of "12 blue whales, 40 humpback whales, 400 Risso's dolphins, 300 northern right whale dolphins, 250 Pacific white-sided dolphins, and two minke whales."

"Everywhere you go you just see blows" -- that is, the blues spouting -- Nancy Black, owner of Monterey Bay Whale Watch, [told](#) the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. It seems that the abundance of krill, the tiny shrimp-like creatures that the whales feed on, attracted about 100 of the blues. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, they were abundant with an estimated population of more than 200,000 living in the Southern (or Antarctic) Ocean alone. Then they were hunted nearly to extinction. Today, only about 10,000 of them are believed to exist.

Dog Day Afternoon in the Arctic

If you follow the Pacific coastline from Monterey all the way north, sooner or later you'll arrive at Kivalina along the Chukchi Sea coast in the Alaskan Arctic. Keep going along that coastline even further north and you'll pass by Point Hope, Point Lay, Wainwright, and finally Barrow -- the northernmost town in the United States.

At Barrow, you'll be at the confluence of the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas of the Arctic Ocean. Now, head east along the Beaufort Sea coast to Nuiqsut, and Kaktovik, both Iñupiat communities. The Chukchi and Beaufort Seas are remarkably rich in krill, and home to the endangered bowhead whale. It may not be quite as large as the blue, but head-to-tail it can still measure an impressive enough 66 feet and weigh up to 75 tons, and it has one special attribute. It is believed to be the longest-lived mammal on the planet.

Like blues, bowheads were also abundant -- an estimated population of 30,000 well into the mid-nineteenth century. Then commercial whalers began hunting them big time, driving them nearly extinct in less than 50 years. Today, about 10,000 bowhead whales live in the Arctic Ocean. Blues and bowheads could be considered the elders of the sea.

While the blues were feeding in Monterey Bay, Shell's drill ships, the Noble Discoverer and the Kulluk, were migrating north, with the hope of drilling for oil in those very waters this summer. Unlike the jubilant tourists, scientists, and residents of the California coast, the Iñupiat people of the Arctic coast are now living in fear of Shell's impending arrival; and little wonder, as that oil giant is about to engage in what may be the most dangerous form of drilling anywhere on Earth. After all, no one

actually knows how to clean up an oil spill that happens under the ice in the harsh conditions of the Arctic Ocean. Despite that, the Obama administration has been [fast-tracking](#) Shell's dangerous drilling plan, while paying remarkably little attention to the ecological fears it raises and the potential devastation a major spill or spills would cause to the native peoples of the north.

No need to worry, though: Shell swears it's dealing with the possibility of such a disaster, even to the point of bringing in dogs "to detect oil spills beneath snow and ice." No joke. "When it comes to drilling for oil in the harsh and unpredictable Arctic," the *Guardian* [reported](#) in March, "Shell has gone to the dogs, it seems. A dachshund and two border collies to be specific."

The Obama administration has been no less reassuring. There will be a genuine [federal inspector](#) on board those drill ships 24/7. And whether you're listening to the oil company or our government, you should just know that it's all a beautiful dream, nothing more. When a spill happens, and it's minus 35 degrees Fahrenheit, and the wind's howling at 65 miles per hour, and sea ice is all around you and moving, the idea that a highly trained dachshund or federal inspector will be able to do a thing is pure fantasy. Believe me, I've been there under those conditions and if the worst occurs, this won't be a repeat of BP in the Gulf of Mexico (bad as that was). Help will not be available.

Hand Shell this for honesty: the company has [admitted](#) that, if a spill were to happen late in the summer drilling season (of course it won't!), they will simply have to leave the spilled oil "in place" for nine months to do its damndest. The following summer they will theoretically deal with what's left of the spill, and -- though they don't say this -- the possibility of a dead or dying sea.

The U.S. National Environmental Policy Act [requires](#) that the government must do an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) if there is reason to believe that a proposed activity will significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The Department of Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation, and Enforcement avoided the time consuming EIS process, however, issuing instead what is called a "Finding of No Significant Impact."

In late June, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar [said](#), "I believe there will not be an oil spill" from Shell's Arctic drilling, and proceeded full speed ahead. Know this: in 2011 alone in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, Shell [reported](#) 63 "operational spills" due to equipment failure. That happened in a tropical environment.

Oil companies must have an approved spill-response plan before drilling can proceed. But Shell's government-rubber-stamped plan turns out to be full of holes, including the claim that, should a spill occur, they will be able to recover [90% of all spilled oil](#). (In the cases of both the *Exxon Valdez* and the *Deepwater Horizon* disasters [less than 10%](#) was recovered.) In fact, it's a claim from which the company is [already backtracking](#). On July 10th, 10 environmental organizations, including the Alaska Wilderness League, the Center for Biological Diversity, and Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands (REDOIL), [filed a lawsuit](#) challenging Shell's spill-response plans in an attempt to stop this summer's drilling.

In addition, Shell's 37-year-old 294-foot barge, the Arctic Challenger, a necessity for its clean-up plan, is still awaiting final certification from the U.S. Coast Guard. Reporting on the failure to receive it so far, the *Los Angeles Times* [pointed out](#) that "[e]ngineers from the oil company say it's no longer appropriate to require them to meet the rigorous weather standards originally proposed." Unfortunately, there couldn't be anything more basic to drilling in the Arctic than its fearsome weather. If you can't hack that -- and no oil company can -- you shouldn't be sending your drill ships northward.

And a massive spill or a series of smaller ones is hardly the only danger to one of the more fragile environments left on the planet. The seismic testing that precedes any drilling and the actual drilling operations bring "[lots of noise](#)" to the region. This could be very harmful to the bowhead whales, which use sound to navigate through sea ice in darkness. Seismic testing represents, as Peter Matthiessen [wrote](#) in 2007, following a trip we took together along the Arctic coast of Alaska, "the most severe acoustic insult to the marine environment I can imagine short of naval warfare."

In addition, Shell's drill ships will put significant amounts of toxic substances into the Arctic air each year, including an estimated 336 tons of nitrogen oxides and up to 28 tons of PM_{2.5} -- fine particles that include dust, dirt, soot, smoke, and liquid droplets. These are harmful to human health and will degrade the Arctic's clean atmosphere.

Despite opposition from indigenous Inupiat communities, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) nonetheless approved

air quality permits for the ships in January. On June 28th, however, Shell [admitted](#) that the Noble Discoverer “cannot meet the [EPA’s] requirements for emissions of nitrogen oxide and ammonia” and asked the agency to loosen air quality rules for Arctic drilling.

Add to this one more thing: even before Shell’s drilling begins, or there can be any assessment of it, the Obama administration is already planning to [open up](#) more Arctic waters to offshore drilling in the years to come. Think of this -- and of the possible large-scale, irremediable pollution of the Arctic’s watery landscape -- as the canary in the coalmine when it comes to the oceans of the world. Especially now, when global warming is melting northern ice and opening the way for energy corporations backed by governments to train their sights on those waters and their energy riches.

Not Just the Arctic

Here’s the simplest fact: we are killing our oceans. Rapidly. Already, the massive atmospheric accumulation of greenhouse gases from the burning of non-Arctic fossil fuels has, scientists believe, caused a [rise in sea surface temperature](#) of 1 degree Centigrade over the past 140 years. This may not seem impressive, but much of this increase has occurred during the past few decades. As a result, scientists again believe, there has been a potentially catastrophic 40% decline, largely since 1950, in the phytoplankton that support the whole marine food chain. Headlines from media reports on this decline catch the grim possibilities in the situation: “[The Dead Sea](#),” “[Are Our Oceans Dying?](#)”

In addition, the oceans absorb about 25% of the carbon dioxide (CO₂) we put in the atmosphere and this has made their waters [abnormally acidic](#), transforming [coral reefs into graveyards](#). Earlier this year, we [learned](#) that “the current acidification is potentially unparalleled in at least the last 300 million years of Earth history, and raises the possibility that we are entering an unknown territory of marine ecosystem change.” This July, Jane Lubchenco, chief of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, [referred](#) to such ocean acidification as climate change’s “equally evil twin.”

Similarly, the rapid melting of sea ice in the Arctic Ocean is already proving catastrophic for a host of species, including narwhals, polar bears, walruses, seals, and sea birds. And you have undoubtedly heard about the [massive expanses](#) of garbage, especially plastic, now clotting our oceans. Chris Jordan’s [powerful photographs](#) of dead albatrosses at Midway Atoll, their bellies full of plastic, catch what this can mean for marine life. And then there’s the [increasing](#) industrial overfishing of all waters, which is threatening to [decimate](#) fish populations globally.

And keep in mind, that’s only so far. Drilling for what Michael Klare [calls](#) “tough oil” or “extreme energy” in a range of perilous locations only ensures the further degradation of the oceans. In addition to the possible opening up of the Arctic Ocean, there has been an expansion of deepwater drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, offshore drilling in “[Iceberg Alley](#)” near Newfoundland, deep-offshore drilling in the Brazilian “pre-salt” fields of the Atlantic Ocean, and an increase in offshore drilling in West Africa and Asia.

As Klare writes in his new book, [The Race for What’s Left](#), “Drilling for oil and natural gas in the deep waters of the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic, and the Pacific is likely to accelerate in the years ahead... Even the ecological damage wreaked by the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster of April 2010 is not likely to slow this drive.” He adds that “the giant oil companies will spend an estimated \$387 billion on offshore drilling operations between 2010 and 2014.”

In other words, we’re in a drill, baby, drill world, even when it comes to the most perilous of watery environments, and if the major energy companies have their way, there will be no turning back until the oceans are, essentially, a garbage dump.

From Standing on the Seashore to Interconnectedness

Of his epic photographic series *Seascapes*, artist Hiroshi Sugimoto wrote, “Can someone today view a scene just as primitive man might have?... Although the land is forever changing its form, the sea, I thought, is immutable.”

All his [seascapes](#) are black-and-white with equal part sky and sea -- and in them the oceans do indeed look pristine and immutable. If you stand on the shore of any ocean today, the waters may still look that way to you. Unfortunately, we now know that those waters are increasingly anything but.

Seeing blue whales breaching and feeding is indeed a thrill and does breed an urge for protection and conservation, but what we see on the surface of the planet's oceans is only a miniscule fraction of all their life. It is possible that we know more about outer space than we do about what actually lives in the depths of those waters. And that catches something of the conundrum facing us as they are exploited and polluted past some tipping point: How do we talk about protecting what we can't even see?

Despite inadequacies, faults, and failures, the conservation movement to protect public lands in the U.S. has been something of a triumph, providing enjoyment for us and crucially needed habitat for many species with whom we share this Earth. Any of us, paying little or nothing, can enjoy public lands of various sizes, shapes, and varieties: national parks, national forests, officially designated wilderness areas, national wildlife refuges, state parks, city parks.

The success of land conservation, I'd suggest, was founded on one simple idea -- walking. Henry David Thoreau's famous essay "[Walking](#)" began as a lecture he gave at the Concord Lyceum on April 23, 1851, and was published in 1862 after his death in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Environmentalist John Muir made the connection between walking and land conservation explicit through his unforgettably lyrical prose about hiking the mountains of California.

Later, novelist Edward Abbey showed us how to walk in the desert, and also gave us a recipe for "[monkey wrenching](#)" -- forms of sabotage to protest environmental destruction and in defense of conservation that is [alive and well today](#). There have been so many others who have written about walking on, and in, the land: Mary Austin, Margaret Murie, David Abram, William deBuys, Rebecca Solnit, and Terry Tempest Williams, among others. But this simplest of free and democratic ideas that helped make public lands familiar and inspired their conservation against industrial destruction falls away completely when we enter the oceanic realm.

We cannot walk in the ocean, or hike there, or camp there, or from its depths sit and contemplate our situation and nature's. All we can do is stand on its shores and watch, or swim or surf its edges, or boat and float across its surface. The oceans are not us. We lack fins, we lack gills. We are not naturally invested in our oceans and their riches, which are such potentially lucrative assets for those who want to profit off them -- and destroy them in the process.

Nonetheless, for their conservation, somehow we need to learn to walk those waters. It's not enough to have the necessary set of grim facts, figures, and information about how they are being endangered. We need a philosophy, an "ocean ethics" akin to the "land ethics" that environmentalist Aldo Leopold wrote about in his seminal book *A Sand County Almanac*. We don't have it yet, but a good place to start would be with the idea of "interconnectedness."

It's a very old idea, as German poet-philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once said, "The truth was known already, long ago." Rachel Carson, for instance, gave meaning to interconnectedness on land in her famed book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, by linking the fate of bird species to the rise of industrial toxins. She symbolically linked the potential extinction of species like that national symbol the Bald Eagle, whose numbers had [plummeted](#) from an estimated 50,000 breeding pairs in the lower 48 states to about 400 in the early 1960s, to our own sense of well- or ill-being. The time has come to connect in a similar way the fate of marine life with the rise of offshore drilling, climate change, ocean acidification, plastic pollution, and industrial overfishing.

As I can attest from my decade-long engagement with the far north, the Arctic is no longer the remote place disconnected from our daily lives that we imagine. In fact, I often think about it as the most connected place on Earth.

The tiny semipalmated sandpipers, a shorebird I can see along East Coast beaches any fall, is the same species I saw nesting each summer along the Beaufort Sea coast, near where Shell plans to drill. Hundreds of millions of birds migrate to the Arctic from every corner of the planet annually to rear their young -- a celebration of interconnectedness. But so do industrial toxins migrate to the Arctic from every region of the world, making humans and animals in some parts of the far north among the [most contaminated](#) inhabitants of the planet -- a tragedy of interconnectedness.

What happens there will also affect us in frightening ways. The rapid [disintegration](#) and [melting](#) of Arctic icebergs, glaciers, and sea ice is projected to raise global sea levels, threatening coastal cities across the northern hemisphere. And the melting of the Arctic [permafrost](#) and of frozen areas of the [seafloor](#) is likely to release huge amounts of methane (about 20 times more potent

than CO₂ as a greenhouse gas) that could prove potentially catastrophic for the planet. This is why the time has come to focus on oceanic interconnectedness -- if we hope to save our oceans and the planet as we have known it.

For more than a century, environmental organizations have focused on lobbying Congress as a (if not *the*) primary strategy for supporting land conservation against industrial destruction. But in the age of *Citizens United*, Big Oil and King Coal will certainly outspend the lobbying efforts of these organizations by orders of magnitude. In addition, when it comes to the oceans, Congress plays a minor role, at least so far. Most of the crucial decisions go through the executive branch.

Instead of harshly criticizing Obama's [offshore drilling policy](#), green groups have generally appealed to his good environmental sense and instincts -- a strategy that has not worked. This attitude is changing however. In May in a letter published in the *New York Times*, David Yarnold, president of the National Audubon Society, [wrote](#): "Imagine: a president who ignores the advice of his own scientists on a key environmental issue, dredging for votes in an election year. Sound familiar? The administration is ignoring warnings from the Coast Guard, the United States Geological Survey, the Government Accountability Office, and hundreds of scientists. All say the [oil] industry is not prepared to drill safely in Arctic waters. Their nightmare scenario: a BP-like blowout in an ice-locked sea."

Litigation has been the next best option. Inupiat activists and green groups have, in recent years, filed numerous lawsuits meant to impede or stop Shell's drilling plans. Some were won, others lost, but the plans to drill remain ongoing.

Monkey wrenching is the last resort. Greenpeace has been leading the charge on that with creativity and passion in their [Save the Arctic](#) campaign. Above all, though, if we are to protect our oceans, the public must be engaged. If our children and grandchildren are to experience the excitement of seeing blue whales breach and feed, we better get busy. After all, Shell is adrift in Arctic waters. It's time to bring them back to shore