

Tourist Trap



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The Deepwater Horizon spill could not have come at a worse time for those who depend on tourism as their livelihood, as destinations in the Gulf were just entering the peak summer season.

Stephen Holland, associate director of UF’s Center for Tourism Research and Development, says economic impacts from the spill occurred in phases.

“When the oil is waterborne, we see disruptions in local seafood consumption and cancellations of recreational and commercial boating and fishing trips,” Holland says. “That affects other parts of the coastal economy, such as ice and bait sales, boat motor repairs, marina dock payments and diesel sales. We also see diversions of cruise ships and off-shore scuba diving and snorkeling excursions.”

As the oil enters the near-shore waters, disruptions spread to activities like personal watercraft use, para-sailing, surfing, fishing from piers, near-shore scuba/snorkeling, near shore eco-tours and dinner and sunset cruises.

But when the oil washes up on beaches, the magnitude of impacts explodes.

“First come the cancellations of beach trips, stays in hotels, motels and time-shares. Then we see reduced patronage of restaurants, grocery stores, bars, golf courses, water parks, shopping and convenience stores,” Holland adds. “Tanning, beach walking, spending quality time with family, kite flying, surf-fishing, bird watching, escaping the heat and just plain relaxing — it’s all suddenly off-limits.”

And even though a very limited number of Florida beaches experienced any actual oil pollution, it was hard to tell by the media coverage.

“Undeniably, in addition to the environmental, economic and social impacts, the Oil Spill was also a crisis of perception,” says Lori Pennington-Gray, Director of UF’s Tourism Crisis Management Institute.

Media coverage flowed almost as fast as the oil and the impact on tourism was immediate.

“The intensity of this coverage obviously had a tremendous impact on travelers’ awareness and interest in the spill,” says Pennington-Gray. “It has also clearly had negative impacts, particularly on potential tourists to the region.”

Between early May and late June 2010 the UF institute collaborated with Tampa-based Research Data Services, Inc. on three surveys of potential and/or past visitors to Gulf Coast beach destinations.

The study found that the percentage of respondents who said the oil spill caused them to change their vacation destination rose as the crisis continued. Almost 20 percent of respondents indicated an affect in the first survey, 34.4 percent in the second survey and 35.3 in the third survey.

When broken down by region, the research found that residents in the Southeast and Midwest, as well as international tourists, all increased over time. In the Northeast, however, concerns rose between the first and second survey, then went down in the third survey.

“This may have been related to the fact that VISIT FLORIDA, the state tourism agency, received \$25 million from BP for advertising and a portion of these advertising dollars were spent in major metro markets such as New York and Philadelphia,” Pennington-Gray says.

The institute continues to conduct follow-up research to determine the long-term impact on visitors’ perceptions of Florida beaches.

“The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico provided a unique setting to monitor how risk perceptions of potential tourists change over a prolonged period of time. Tracking the dynamics over a prolonged crisis may provide significant insight into response and recovery efforts,” says Pennington-Gray.