

## **"Our oil, our environment, our responsibility"**

While the Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club acknowledges that occasional accidental hydrocarbon releases are a reality in the hydrocarbon sector we are alarmed at the current spate of spills. Whether sabotage or not, the country needs to strengthen the preparedness of the sector at all stages, from the maintenance of pipeline and related infrastructure, on site facility security, detection of spills, the response to spillage and the dissemination of information to stakeholders.

To date, has there been any information coming from the relevant authorities indicating whether or not seafood caught from the surrounding fishing grounds is safe to consume? Has there been any information indicating which areas in south Trinidad are unsafe to bath at? Guapo Beach, in between the affected beaches of La Brea and Granville but mercifully spared of oil itself, is still actively being use for sea bathing. Are any of the other substances released during the spill or in the detergents being used in the cleanup known to have any lasting harmful effects? After all, the currents of the Gulf of Paria form a clockwise gyre so that some pollutants from the spill are going to remain in circulation for some time, eventually affecting the northern areas of the gulf as well.

While the Gulf of Paria ecosystem is no stranger to small naturally occurring oil seepages, the ecosystem is not capable of handling a spillage of this nature by itself. Just because the oiling of one seabird was publicized certainly doesn't mean than no other plant or animal was affected.

Small pockets of mangrove dot the south west coast of Trinidad, the most relevant being at Rousillac, Guapo and Icacos. From the images being circulated on social media, the edge of the Rousillac/Otaheite mangrove forest and adjacent shoreline has clearly been affected. The mangroves support colonies of crabs, an already threatened resource in this country. The small mudflat at the mouth of the river there provides a feeding ground for many species of birds, including the Scarlet Ibis. The shallow waters are trawled for shrimp and catfish by fishermen. It will be many years before this area recovers fully.

Further afield, just off the coast of Icacos, lies the Soldado Rock Wildlife Sanctuary, home to Brown Pelicans, Magnificent Frigatebirds and other seabirds. The waters here are also frequented by sea turtles and marine mammals. If oil was able to reach Icacos, do we know if there has been any impact on Soldado Rock? Is there any more oil in the water that has yet to come ashore?

We hope that this spill does not worsen and will serve as a lesson as to why oil spill prevention and response must be taken seriously by both the authorities and citizens of our country.

**Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club**

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### **Publication Details**

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Date</b>
Trinidad Express	9 Jan 2014
Trinidad Guardian	9 Jan 2014
Newsday	n/a