

Day 61, Voyage 2, August 8, 2011

Morning found us at the epicenter of Deepwater Horizon. It seemed fitting to be here now, the summer after, with Iain Kerr, my partner in this project and James, Johnny and Cathy-the first three people to volunteer on this project before I even talked to Iain about it. This one incident became the largest marine pollution disaster in US history and profoundly changed the course of our lives, at least for Sandy, James, Johnny, Cathy and me. I took the time to reflect and take it all in.

I took a picture. It's attached so you can see what we saw...nothing. Nothing but water, clouds and sky. No rigs. No boats. No birds. No whales. No dolphins. No flying fish. No jellies. No sign of life except for us. It was surreal. Stunning that the large relief wells we saw last year were gone. Stunning that 11 people died and the Gulf was poisoned and there was nothing to mark its occurrence. It was as if it never happened.

It's not that I expected much. I expected there was likely to be nothing there anymore. Hard to post a memorial sign out that deep. But, still, thinking and knowing are two different things. It just seemed off that a calamity this big could fade into nothing.

We had watched an old Ocean Alliance corporate video last night. In it Roger Payne was narrating and he made two comments that came to my mind while staring out at Deepwater Horizon. In one, he talked about seeing a dead whale on the beach. Someone had carved their initials into it and stuffed a cigar in its blowhole. It was a experience that changed him forever and caused him to devote his life to studying whales. In the second, he talked about how went to Argentina to study whales and took his family. Indeed, he did and they were quite young at the time.

Over the past few years, there have been comments made about Roger being the old whale guy who revolutionized the way we think about whales because of their songs and me being the young whale guy who is revolutionizing how we think about whales because of the their cell lines and DNA we study. I am not sure if these comments are true. But hearing Roger's words, I found a similar echo in my own life.

I saw an oil crisis on a Louisiana beach in 2010. It was an experience that struck a deep chord in me and changed me forever. It has propelled me into a lifelong study of pollution in whales in ways I had not imagined. I went to the Gulf of Mexico. I took my family. Strange place to takes ones family, but we went. I also took my students, staff, colleagues and university. I hope we make a difference. I hope something like this event never happens again. If it does, I hope we are ready.

The day was spent focused on water sampling. We started at the epicenter and collected water at 2 depths (100 feet and 2,900 feet), every 10 miles, collecting the last set of samples at near midnight. I have attached pictures of the team with the water

sampler. You can see Iain Kerr holding it as Johnny fills the water bottles. It is a strange gray looking contraption designed to withstand the pressures of deep water. We send it down attached to a line on a large blue reel. You can see Cathy, Iain and John Bradford working the line in another photo.

Sunset picture attached. Not much sun, but some crazy looking clouds.

John

P.S. We are in the Gulf. Our current location is 29 degrees 57.0 minutes North and 87 degrees 22.8 minutes West, for those who want to track us as we go. For Google maps (not Google Earth - but maps) or Bing maps use (include letters and comma): 29.570 N, 87.228 W

For those of you who are new to this email diary - the previous days can be found at: <https://cms.usm.maine.edu/toxicology/dr-wises-voyage-leg-summaries-2011>







