

## **Disaster Tourism at the English Bay Oil Spill**

by Guest Contributors - Monday, April 13, 2015

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**By Emily Griffiths**

In the wake of the oil spill a few days ago, I set out this morning with my partner to see the aftermath first hand. I really didn't want to go, because I don't enjoy feeling depressed or enraged, but denial isn't a healthy choice, either.

We arrive at English Bay around noon. It's almost as if nothing has happened. It's like any Saturday, folks are just out here, doing their thing; people jog, walk, or cycle along the seawall, a mass of tankers blocks the horizon. We know something's up, though, as a helicopter hovers by and the Coast Guard passes back and forth in their little boat. A bizarrely D.I.Y. handwritten sign reads "Oil Spill. Area Toxic. Do Not Touch Rocks or Sand. Do Not Go Barefoot" in blue Sharpie. A row of more formalized signs lines the shoreline, providing an official "Water Safety Notice" from The City of Vancouver.



A lone Park Ranger in a neon orange windbreaker strolls back and forth across the sand, pausing intermittently to speak to folks wandering by. People are jumping for the chance to share their opinions and concerns regarding the spill, and are happy there's someone official-looking to engage with. I overhear the Ranger thanking two women for "taking an interest in our beaches."

There's not a whole hell of a lot to see here, so we make our way along the seawall towards Stanley Park. En route, we come across a man lining up oil covered rocks on the side of the path. He's wearing white latex gloves smeared dirty brown with oil. He's repositioned one of the official signs as part of his display. His name is Jakub Markiewicz and until we ran into him, I was feeling completely powerless in the face of this ugly event. Just by standing here behind a collection of oily rocks, Jakub is asserting himself and his opinions. When I approach him, he is already talking to a group of passerby's.



Jakub is telling them that even though this is a relatively small spill, the effects will linger in the environment for a long, long time. It is impossible for us to totally “clean up.”

The older woman listening asserts that, since the tankers are so far out, we shouldn't *have* to worry about oil washing up on our beaches. She's clearly one of the Not-In-My-Back-Yard types; folks who remain unconcerned with catastrophe, so long as it doesn't affect them personally. Who cares about the sea-life and smaller coastal communities?

I can't help but feel that this spill was inevitable. I've been watching the tankers encroach over the past few years, growing in number each season. They assert a sense of foreboding onto the otherwise picturesque landscape. Each tanker can hold up to 300 million liters, hinting at a possibility much worse than a 3,000 liter leak. It's evident that even 3,000 liters is causing its fair share of destruction.

Further down the seawall, a couple has parked their bikes and decided to create an impromptu art project. Using scraps of cardboard to protect their hands, they gather oil-covered rocks and spell out “STOP



HARPER” in the sand.

We eventually catch up with the clean-up crews over at Third Beach. When I think of oil spill response and clean up, I think of special technologies separating out oil from water. I expect a large-scale, highly specialized and professional operation. This is not what we find. Instead, there are two white pick-up trucks with HAZ-MAT RESPONSE stenciled on the side and a smattering of volunteers dressed in full

body yellow plastic suits with red lifejackets laying specialty paper towels along the rocks. I know these dedicated folks mean well, but how do they confront the futility of wiping off individual rocks with paper towels as multiple tankers float ominously in the background?



A neon orange Park Ranger and a burly police officer supervise the rock scrubbing from a series of nearby park benches. The Ranger asks the cop, “Are you guys here because of protesters?” The cop responds, “We’re just here to make sure these guys can do their job.”

Sure, Friend. Who’s going to stop them?



I get the feeling that this whole “clean-up” thing is little more than a token effort. The Rangers, the police, the yellow-clad cleanup crew, the helicopters, and the Coast Guard boats are only here to make us think that the city/the province/the country is *doing something* to rectify what’s happened. No doubt the media discussion will soon shift from the poor reaction time to the “success” of the clean-up.

Many of us out here today are outraged by the spill and are looking for a place to direct our energy. A wrong has been committed and we feel the need to *do something about it*. But what can we do in the face of oil spills, impending pipelines, the Harper Government and the global oil-based economy? Perhaps we can do what the Indigenous Land Defenders are doing, which is frontline direct action. But this comes at a risk of being arrested and charged with terrorism, under the new definition. This is a risk, but without

risk, there is no reward. For many of us, it's much easier to allow our energy to be coopted into volunteer clean-up labour.

