Ocean & Coastal Management 103 (2015) 42–55

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Ocean & Coastal Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ocecoaman

Priority responses to the 2006 Guimaras oil spill, Philippines: Will history repeat itself?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 15 June 2011
Received in revised form
5 November 2014
Accepted 7 November 2014
Available online 19 November 2014

Keywords:
Guimaras
Oil spill
Priority needs
Disaster response
Mangroves
Research
Rehabilitation
Environmentalism

ABSTRACT

The Guimaras oil spill of 2006 was the worst environmental accident of the Philippine and coincidentally happened during a period of rapid progress in nationwide communication technology. This study took advantage of the massive media coverage of the incident to answer questions about the priority needs of the affected population, the prominent disaster response, and the rationale for the response. Techniques were combined to implement a descriptive analysis of the available information-interview of key respondents and news survey, substantiated by a document analysis of hardcopy and online materials, and content mapping in the integration and analysis.

The priority needs of the oils spill victims were few and basic-a plain consequence of economic and physical dislocations. Yet, these needs were inadequately met because the many forms of disaster response "diluted" the relief operation and further spawned unwarranted issues that aggravated the situation. Habitat assessment and rehabilitation, especially of mangroves, emerged as the prominent response. Aggressively pushed by experts and advocates, it competed with and overshadowed the priority action on the distressed population.

The environmental response is linked to a lingering foreign crusade. The environmentalism is unregulated and turning adverse, but it continually succeeds because, apart from its domineering advocacy, as foreign imposition, the society is naturally resilient to it, Philippine laws support it and, particularly, even intellectuals espouse it. Moreover, there exists a large pool of potential environment advocates in the country with hardly 1% of which being development-oriented.

Other failures of the disaster response are discussed. The aftermath rippled with issues on litigations, irregularities and continuing research.

1. Introduction

On 11 August 2006, an 18-year old tanker sank just south of Guimaras island in the Philippines and began spilling 2,162,230 L of bunker oil owned by the Philippine National Oil Company (PNOC) or Petron (Olavario, 2009). Dubbed as the Guimaras oil spill, it became the worst environmental accident in the country (Puyat, 2010). The spill wreaked havoc to the southern coastlines of the island (28 barangays[1] in 4 towns) and then spread to the coastlines of Panay (22 barangays in 2 towns of Iloilo Province), Negros (1 barangay) and Bantayan islands (Fig. 1). In Guimaras alone, the incident distressed 23,635 individuals (4727 families) (RDCC-6, 2006). Its second largest town of Nueva Valencia sustained the worst impact involving 12,600 individuals or a hefty 40% of the town's population (RDCC-6, 2006; BFAR, 2005). Later field counts were higher, suggesting that the actual number of residents being affected was increasing (Burgos, 2007a).

The nation was thrown into disarray, ironically, despite the fresh memory of the 18 December 2005 incident, wherein 364,120L of bunker oil polluted the coasts of Semirara island in Mindoro (Magramo, 2007). Task Force Guimaras, the body of lead and support agencies mandated to deal with the present incident, mobilized late on Day 13 (23 August) (UN-OCHA, 2006a) and mainly as a consequence of the fateful Day 11 meeting of the local government units (LGUs) of Iloilo Province. Prompted by the threat of the westward spread of oil pollutants across the Guimaras Strait, executives rushed a disaster action plan and declared the province under a "state of calamity." On Day 16 (26 August), the President of the Republic declared a "national calamity" (Avendaño and Napallacan, 2006).

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[1] The smallest political unit or administrative division in the Philippines; a local counterpart to a village.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2014.11.007
0964-5691/

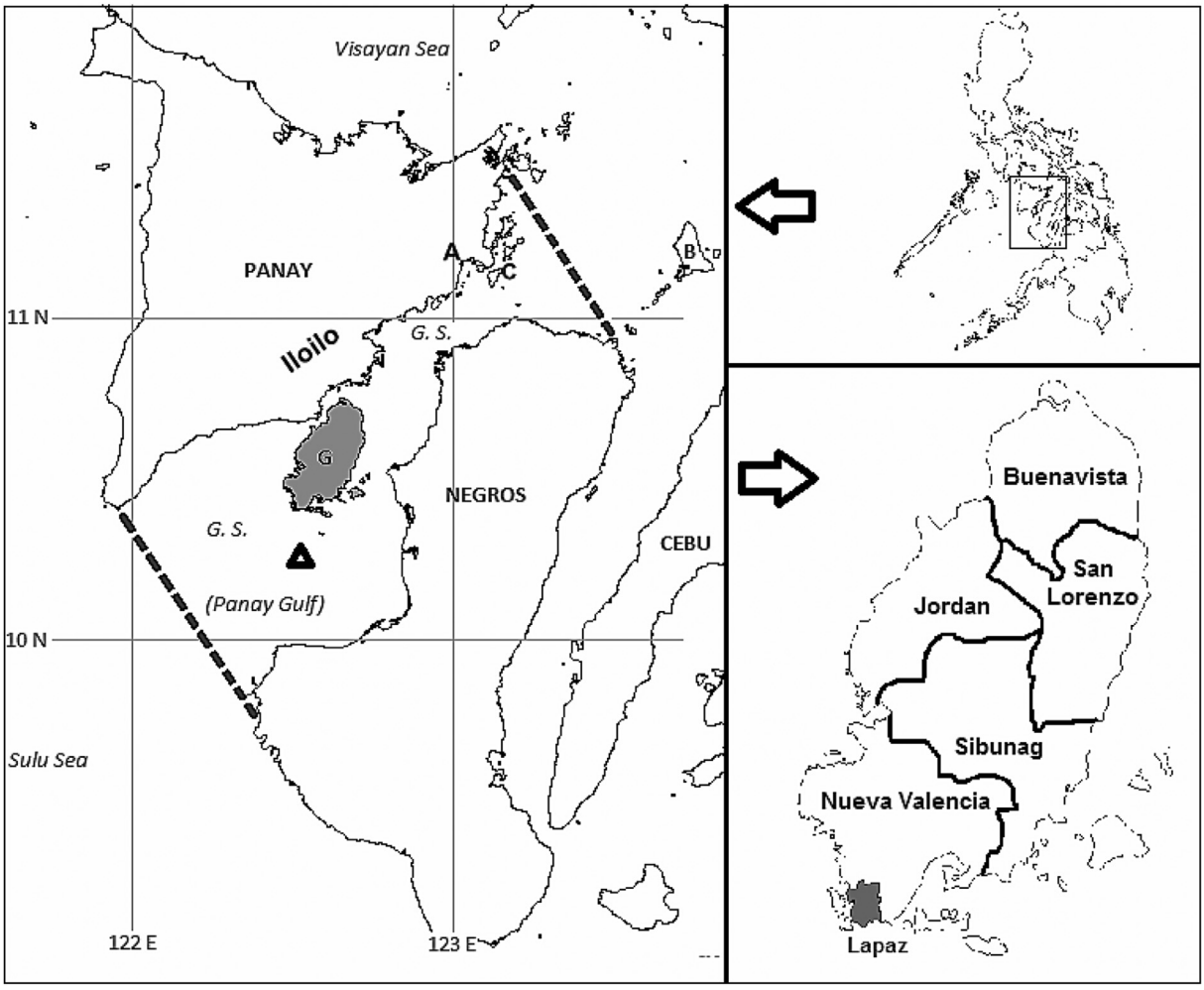

Fig. 1. The study domain (left), centered on the island province of Guimaras (G, shaded), is situated at the central portion of the Philippine archipelago (top right). Dotted lines enclose the Guimaras Strait (G.S.). A triangle marks the approximate location of the sunken tanker, MT Solar-1, in what is popularly called the Panay Gulf. The strait is bounded northwest by the coastlines of Iloilo Province in Panay Island and southeast by Negros Island. The small island of Bantayan (B) is located further northeast. The northern coastal towns of Iloilo are: A – Ajuy and C – Concepcion. Nueva Valencia (bottom right) is the second largest of the five municipalities of Guimaras with a population of at least 31,996 at the time of the incident (11 August 2006). Its hardest hit barangay of Lapaz is shaded. Source of coastline data: GEBCO Digital Atlas Centenary Edition (IOC, IHO and BODC, 2003).

No less devastating was the nature of the disaster response: While the needs of the oil spill victims were few and basic, the responses were many and diverted focus on other priorities. As a consequence, there emerged a host of extra conflicts arising from, among others, goods allocation and distribution, funding, cleanup, recovery operations, and even the conduct of investigations. Similarly with the previous (Semirara) incident, the plight of the human population was, again, masked by an overwhelming outcry for marine habitats (notably the mangroves), their assessment, cleanup and rehabilitation[2] (Burgos, 2007b; Ramirez, 2007). The government could not come up with a livelihood plan or alternative agenda on lost incomes, hence, desperate claimants embraced existing compensation offers including the controversial ones (Sinay, 2007a,b; Panay News, 2007). The tanker remains sunken to date, and there is no unequivocal information about oil leakage, the extent of pollution, and the hazard posed by the not-so-visible oil contaminants. Only the following emerged as definite: a disgruntled population (Punongbayan, 2010; Reyes et al., 2010), oil residues in Nueva Valencia (Pahila et al., 2010; Subong, 2011; Fernandez, 2011), and various problems and issues generated by a frantic disaster response.

The disaster response was the more colorful part of the oil spill history and, fortunately, there was massive information available to shed light on the following questions:

1. Were the priority needs of the affected population satisfied?
2. What emerged as the prominent response?
3. What caused the prominent response?

The next section discusses the sources of information of this study, the data collection, processing methods and certain limitations. The findings and analyses are discussed at length in the last section, which also incorporates the conclusion. Discussions begin with a brief recount of the incident and its impact, followed by a historical portrayal of the disaster response and the bundle of issues that emerged out of the extra responses. Foreign support is elaborated to emphasize that external entities had extensive footprint in on-going and planned activities. The final discussions are about the disaster analysis, the underlying forcing by global environmentalism, and the conclusion. In general, the disaster analysis reveals about the failed government action, the prominence of

[2] "Rehabilitation" denotes the reparation of ecosystems or non-human habitats. This context is retained throughout this study unless otherwise specified.