

Original article

Coping with a threat to quality of life: the case of the *Prestige* disaster

Faire face à une menace pour la qualité de vie : le cas du naufrage du *Prestige*

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Abstract

The *Prestige* disaster occurred off the Galician coast (North-West Spain), after the sinking of *Prestige* oil tanker in November 2002. The breaking up and sinking of the ship in heavy seas resulted in the discharge of thousands of tonnes of toxic and heavy oil. The oil was washed up not only on the Galician coast, but also along the North coast of Spain, and the West of France. A year later, the consequences of this accident on the quality of life of Galician people are only beginning to become apparent. The present study evaluates the inhabitants' and volunteers' perceptions and evaluations of the social impact of the disaster and its effect on the population. This paper also provides a diagnosis of the changing relationship between a damaged environment and a human community, both immediately and a year after the catastrophe. A total of 1491 and 1504 interviews were undertaken in Galicia in two phases of the research amongst people over 18 years old. This paper reports on the changes in the attitudes of the population in several respects: the degree to which they were affected by the catastrophe, their understanding of what happened, their attribution of responsibility and the assessment of the consequences, and finally, their feelings and assessment of satisfaction and credibility of the political institutions, organizations, and the media.

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Résumé

La catastrophe du *Prestige* a eu lieu sur la côte galicienne au nord-ouest de l'Espagne après le naufrage du pétrolier *Prestige* en novembre 2002. Le navire a eu sa coque brisée et a coulé, provoquant un écoulement de milliers de tonnes de pétrole lourd, toxique. Le pétrole ainsi libéré s'est répandu non seulement sur la côte galicienne, mais également dans l'Ouest de la France. Un an plus tard, les conséquences de cette catastrophe sur la qualité de vie des Galiciens ne font que commencer à se manifester. Cette recherche explore les perceptions et évaluations des habitants et des volontaires de l'impact social du désastre et de ses effets sur la population. Cette étude établit un diagnostic de l'évolution des relations entre un environnement abîmé et une communauté humaine, immédiatement après la catastrophe et une année après. Un total de 1491 et 1504 entretiens ont été menés en deux phases en Galicie sur une population de plus de 18 ans. Les changements d'attitudes des populations ont porté sur le degré avec lequel elles étaient touchées par la catastrophe, leur compréhension de ce qui était arrivé, les attributions de responsabilité et les évaluations des conséquences, et leur évaluation concernant la crédibilité des institutions politiques, des organismes et des médias, ainsi que leur sentiment de satisfaction concernant leurs actions respectives.

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Mots clés : Naufrage du *Prestige* ; Catastrophe ; Confiance ; Perception du risque ; Analyse loglinéaire

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1. Introduction and background

On 13 November 2002, a Bahamian registered oil tanker, the '*Prestige*', containing 77,000 t of crude oil was severely damaged in a storm 250 kms off the Galician coast in North-West Spain. The ship split in two, sank and spilt thousands of tons of heavy and toxic oil, much of which was blown landwards arriving on the Galician beaches as well as the coasts of northern Spain and France. Having sunk, the tanker continued to discharge large quantities of oil for months afterwards. The sinking of the '*Prestige*' is generally acknowledged to have been the most serious ecological disaster to have affected Europe. While the environmental damage was immediate, the social and psychological impacts on the population are still being felt 1 year later and in some cases are now only becoming manifest.

The oil spill had a significant effect, not only from an ecological and human point of view, but also on the economy of the region. Galicia is highly dependant on the sea because fishing and fishing-related activities are a vital part of the GDP of the region. Furthermore, the coast is also important for tourism. Government figures indicate that tourism in Galicia had recovered by Easter 2003 to 80% of the level of the previous year; however, some organizations maintain their distrust in respect of this figure. The fact that the number of visitors and tourists decreased, the more general impact on the perception of the area as a potential holiday destination (the main percentage of visitors come from other parts of Spain) as well as the impact of the oil spill on the catching and selling of seafood, all contributed to the concerns of the inhabitants of Galicia. The scale of its ecological impact was demonstrated by Carlota Viada, Director of the Conservation Department at SEO/BirdLife, who made a conservative estimate that the 23,000 birds collected in Spain, France and Portugal only comprise 10–20% of the birds affected by the *Prestige* disaster (RSPB, 2003).

Galicia has been the victim of previous oil tanker accidents (e.g. *Urquiola*, *Aegean Sea*, *Casón*, among others), but the social and political response was considerably more muted on this occasion. One key aspect of the social response comes from both the scarcity of information, and the unreliability of available information. From the time the tanker was in trouble and approached the Galician coast looking for refuge, until it finally sunk in the ocean, neither the national nor regional government nor the ship owners or insurers provided information on the risk to the population and/or the ecosystem. The immediate response of both the national and the regional Governments from the outset was focused entirely on playing down the level of the risk involved, denying the possibility of any oil spill, and underestimating the importance of the magnitude of the tragedy. It was announced that everything was under control, and the public should have no cause for concern. This strategy was maintained even in the face of evidence to the contrary, supplied for example by the mass media. This resulted in a loss of credibility in the government as well as other official institutions. The only scientific information available to the local population about the nature of the contamination coming from *Prestige* oil tanker or its associated health effects

on citizens came from non-governmental organizations such as ecological groups, the mass-media, and several French and Portuguese research institutions. The Spanish National Scientific Research Center (CSIC) as well as some Universities also produced reports contradicting the Government's analysis of the potential risk and impact of the capsizing of the oil tanker. All these reports were ignored or openly criticized.

As time went by, it became clear to the general public that the information provided by both the national and regional governments was unreliable, and that there were real ecological and economic threats to the local community. This was later confirmed with the breaking up and sinking of the tanker while it was being towed away from the coast, a decision which was widely criticized by experts because it could only extend the damage to a wider area; this indeed happened. At this stage social action was initiated by the community both in terms of taking practical action to mitigate the effects of environmental damage, but also political action in the form of public protest against government complacency. Several citizens' organizations as well as members of local private companies and a few co-coordinators from different non-governmental organizations assumed the management of the crisis along the entire stretch of the Galician coast. The most striking example of collective action was the presence of thousands of people who volunteered to clean up the coast by hand (i.e. with the most basic and inadequate tools and without appropriate safety protection) and who received neither institutional nor financial support.

Social pressure and protest, with the collaboration of the mass media, not only forced the Government to take an interest in organizing volunteers (albeit 3 months later), but also to approve an emergency plan to create new infrastructures and develop projects for the benefit of the social and economic development of Galicia such as high speed rail improvements, motorways, etc. Furthermore, most fishermen in the areas were subsidized by the government. Both measures were partially effective in muting the protests, as was confirmed by the local elections held shortly afterwards. Whereas there was a strong political reaction in most Galician cities (where the governmental party lost political control of all councils, with only one exception), such a reaction did not happen in the affected rural areas where all the councils were retained.

When we speak about a toxic contamination event there are three stages through which a risk situation passes: a) non-issue, b) public issue, and c) political issue (Reich, 1991; McGee, 1999). Reich defined *non-issue* as the phase prior to the public identification of the contamination agent. In the *public issue* phase the situation moves from being a disaster at an individual level to a disaster at a group level; victims try to organize and expand the scope of collective action. The disaster moves from being a public issue to a *political issue* when it gets into the political domain, involving other governmental or non-governmental organizations, political parties, social movements, and the mass media. The *Prestige* case moved very quickly into this third phase. More importantly, a year later, it still remains there.

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