

Morgan Freeman, Ted Danson show support for post-oil spill Gulf impact expedition

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Michael Dumas, Press-Register



MICHAEL DUMAS/Press-Register Mississippi actor Morgan Freeman speaks in support of Oceana, an international organization focused on ocean conservation, at that company's press conference in Gulfport on Aug. 24, 2010. Fellow actor, and Oceana board member, Ted Danson looks on. Both men were showing their support for an ongoing Oceana expedition measuring the effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on the underwater ecosystem of the Gulf of Mexico.

GULFPORT, Mississippi -- Scientists, activists and two of Hollywood's more recognizable stars held a press conference at Gulfport Harbor on Tuesday to announce an ongoing research expedition across the Gulf of Mexico to assess the impacts of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on underwater ecosystems.

Over the next two months scientists from Oceana -- an international organization focused on ocean conservation -- will conduct the expedition, measuring the effects of the subsurface oil on marine habitats and migration using tags, specially trained divers and two remote-operated vehicles capable of going more than 3,000 feet below the water's surface.

At a press conference aboard the 170-foot research vessel "Oceana Latitude," Oceana's CEO, chief scientist and others shared details of the expedition, which is funded in part by a \$100,000 donation by the apparel company Nautica.

In its first stages, begun in recent weeks, the expedition traveled the waters off the coast of Florida and documented sensitive habitats and marine species at varying depths, not only looking for any sign of oil, but to identify what could be impacted should future spills occur.

According to Dr. Mike Hirshfield, Oceana's chief scientist, over the next few weeks the team will also be tagging several species of sharks, "to understand their migrations and if they're moving into the areas that might have been effected by the oil."

"We wanted to show the people of Florida, the people of the country, the people of the world the kind of underwater habitats that are at risk -- not necessarily from this disaster but from any future disaster," Hirshfield said.



MICHAEL DUMAS/Press-RegisterDr. Mike Hirshfield, chief scientist for Oceana, an international organization focused on ocean conservation, speaks at a press conference in Gulfport on Aug. 24, 2010. Hirshfield is part of an ongoing Oceana expedition measuring the effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on the underwater ecosystem of the Gulf of Mexico.

He explained that the next two-thirds of the expedition will concentrate on areas known to have been impacted by the oil spill, measuring to see how much oil may still be under the water's surface. He said a major concern was that the oil isn't being broken down by bacteria at the rate previously thought, and that as much as 80 percent of what has flowed into the Gulf is still out there.

If "the bugs haven't eaten that much oil, and if the oil is still out there, then it's floating around underneath -- still toxic, still effecting fish, larvae, habitats and the whole underwater world," Hirshfield said.

To help determine this, the scientists will deploy more than a dozen buoys in the vicinity of the Deepwater Horizon explosion and subsequent spill, each fitted with special plastic sensors that are especially sensitive to hydrocarbons, strung with line in 100-meter increments to the sea floor. After five days in the water, the samples will be collected, frozen and brought back to an Oceana laboratory, which will use special lights and other tests to determine the concentration of oil, if any, on them.

He said it could take months for the samples to be properly tested, though "we might have some initial indications based on the flourometry," he said.

Addressing larger issues, actor Morgan Freeman -- who lives in north Mississippi and is a long-time supporter of Oceana and ocean conservation -- said he fully supported a moratorium on offshore drilling, and that it was important to make sure the Gulf is made whole again, especially now that the oil has stopped flowing.

He said he supports "the idea that we can bring enough attention and weight to bear on this situation," to ensure that those responsible "aren't going to walk away thinking that it's safe to go."

Actor Ted Danson had a more forceful perspective, especially when discussing America's dependency on oil, as opposed to other energy sources. Himself an Oceana board member, Danson urged everyone to "do the science so we can be real about the cost and the impact

of the spill."

"Either we change our ways, or nature will change them for us," he said. "You are going to drill your way out of oil one of these days. If we do not get off that system and on to alternative sources of energy . . . then we're idiots.

"We're the yokels that have been left behind."