

# Oil spills, tourists hamper Port Aransas researchers

United Press International  
PORT ARANSAS — Scientists who once studied the Gulf of Mexico from an unspoiled, windswept beach now are squishing through oil from offshore drilling rigs and watching condominiums spring up on the dunes.

"Development on this island is rampant and unchecked," complained Anthony Amos, a physical oceanographer at the University of Texas Marine Science Institute.

Like the ocean, the institute's scientists, faculty and students

are having to adapt to the encroachment of human beings on shore and off. Their studies have moved from strict biology and chemistry into environmental issues, including oil slicks and a seafood supply for the future.

Since 1946, the institute's research buildings and dormitories have been the last outpost of civilization where Mustang Island meets the sea east of Corpus Christi. Just five years ago 13 miles of beach stretched away to the south with nothing but sand dunes and sea oats.

But now the sun bounces off

recreational vehicles parked on the beach, and nearly a dozen condominiums rise from the sand. Port Aransas, once a scruffy fishing village, has turned into a tourist town.

Balls of oil apparently from offshore rigs have been washing onto the Texas coast the past 10 or 15 years. Then in 1979-80, more than 3 million barrels of oil was blown into the ocean from the Ixtoc I well in the Bay of Campeche, Mexico, and drifted 600 nautical miles northwest to Mustang Island.

A yearly change in the ocean currents saved the island from devastation, Amos said. But he is still finding Ixtoc tar reefs — crude oil that has settled to the bottom and mixed with sand — including a 75-foot reef discovered in January.

The tar reefs are "nothing alarming, but interesting," Amos said. They will eventually break into tarballs, wash ashore and blacken tourists' feet.

When the oil spill excitement passed, the institute continued its research into the delicate balances of marine life.

One graduate student is studying the effect of changes in temperature and salinity on crabs. Another is researching the food sources provided by sea grasses, said Rick Tinnin, who directs marine education services at the institute.

The institute oversees a breeding project for Ridley tur-

les, which are being carefully nurtured to replenish the species in the Gulf of Mexico.

The scientists have also learned how to make red fish spawn "almost on command" by varying light and water temperature, Tinnin said. The fish could eventually be used as a food source — grown on farms like catfish — except that they cannot reproduce in fresh water.

Hundreds of tourists troop through the institute when rain drives them off the beach, and Tinnin escorts more than 5,000 high school students a year through the institute. He shows them the ongoing experiments and gives tours of the institute's well-equipped research vessels — the 57-foot "Katy" and the 80-foot "Longhorn."

"These are the kids that are going to be making decisions about my coastline," he said.

The University of Texas will not become officially involved in environmental disputes, so scientists who oppose planned development — like Amos — must protest as private citizens.

Amos is currently combating plans to build a crewboat turning basin at a spot that he believes could be a bird sanctuary.

"There are less and less places where you get these magic days with perfect calm and you get hundreds of roseate spoonbills and reddish egrets. I think it's an incredible site," he said.



photo by Jerrold J. Schaefer

### Bull's-eye

Todd Woodard, captain of the Texas A&M small-bore rifle team, practices for the National Indoor Rifle Championship to be held Feb. 26 and 27 in Boonville, Missouri.

The team will then travel to Benning, Georgia, for the Tournament of Champions March 2. Woodard is a senior journalism major from Crane.

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