

Visit to Gulf brings unexpected findings

Victims of oil spill want revenge against BP, not help with cleanup

I headed to the Gulf to represent The Animal House Veterinary Clinic at Ewa beach. If you care about animals, as we do, going there was the thing to do. I was sent to figure out where our four doctors and six technicians would be of the most use as volunteers.

I wanted to know why we were taking so long to clean up the spill and why BP and Louisiana relief organizations were rejecting help both local and from around the world. What I found when I met with disaster relief officials all along the coast was certainly not what I expected.

My eight weeks of research resulted in contact with an official from the Louisiana Department of Agriculture who picked me up at the airport and escorted me over many hundreds of miles of wetlands and beaches. My mission was to go as far south and east as I could go. I visited Grand Isle, La., to the south and went all the way to Biloxi, Miss., to the east, all along the Gulf waters.

As we explored the devastated area, the damage from Katrina was pointed out. Hundreds of homes and businesses left behind their foundations as they were washed away. That's all that is left. As I met people along the way, I was surprised at the manner in which I was received — hostility and even anger that I would be there as a volunteer. "We just need money" was the response from one United Way official.

I also received some responses from the Audubon Society and from the An-



PATT
STEINER
IN MY
OPINION

imal Rescue League, but none was able to help me in my quest to provide aid.

It turns out that the people of Louisiana want revenge from BP. They are putting their anger ahead of the possibilities of saving the environment. If you volunteer to save an animal or clean a beach, then

BP won't have to pay as much. Unfortunately, that is what it seems to be all about. BP saw the anger and that lack of cooperation as insurmountable and vilification as inevitable. As they had to act and avoid further legal liabilities, they chose to ignore the locals, give them no conversations to distort, and proceed on their own.

The focus on the environmental harm apparently is, and has been, all about money. The Gulf communities are not so much upset by the inherent harm to the environment as to the harm to their economic interests. Is that motivation that different from BP's? How about the bureaucrats that are supposed to protect the environment? They are more interested in the financially rewarding revolving door that separates the regulators and those regulated.

Where were the Gulf residents when the environmentalists were crying out warnings? Accidents never happen, the oil companies take precautions, and the regulators make sure of it, right? Was that thinking due to naiveté, or just greed?

So, having lost their naiveté, have the residents turned their priorities

from money to full-blown, full restoration? Not so much.

I left the official with the Department of Agriculture with one thought, one idea. Let's not "cut off our nose ..." Let's find a way to use the hundreds (or thousands) of volunteers and clean up the mess and save the animals as quickly as possible. Let's do this by handing each volunteer a form to fill out to document the number of hours spent, the expenses and the associated costs if the volunteer had been paid. Hand these forms, approved by their volunteer coordinators, to BP for payment to the fund that will go towards the recovery effort.

So, is BP solely at fault for only caring about profits? Like any other corporation, it has a fiduciary duty to its stockholders, who demand more profits. The only way to protect ourselves from our own greed is through unbiased, vigorous regulation. This is possible only by replacing the revolving door between the regulators and regulated with hurdles instead. How about some period like three years? Private industry employee contracts prohibit employees from working for the competition for one or two years. Why not the government?

Since the oil spill was capped, the beaches have been cleaned up, and there are fewer reports of dead wildlife. Even some fishing areas have been reopened. It will take decades to assess the long-term effects from the oil and the dispersants. Maybe we can use some of this time to also assess how we can do better at regulation.

PATT STEINER is a business adviser in Hawaii and a member of the Hawaii 2020. Reach her at patt@vsadvisors.com.