

Bloomberg

Seahorses Face Bleak Future After BP Oil Slick, Biologists Say

By Alex Morales - Sep 7, 2010

One of the world's smallest species of seahorse could "virtually disappear" because of the [BP Plc](#) oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the chemicals used to clean it up, the Zoological Society of London said today.

Dwarf seahorses are found only in the waters off the Gulf coast, where they have been exposed to high levels of toxins and lost swathes of habitat as a result of the slick and subsequent cleanup operations, the [society](#) said in an e-mailed statement. The U.S. government estimates more than 4 million barrels of crude have polluted Gulf waters since the April spill.

The burning of oil caught in floating seagrass mats as part of the cleanup operation, which is expected to take years, is one threat to the creatures, the group said. Dwarf seahorses face a "bleak" future and could vanish as a result of the largest spill in the U.S., it said.

"It's a serious threat because this species has a very small distribution and it lives in sea grasses, the most fragile marine environment," Heather Koldewey, marine and freshwater conservation program manager for the society, said in a phone interview. "When something this damaging happens that takes up the majority of a species' range, it's very concerning."

The society, which runs the London Zoo, urged BP to continue to use booms during the cleanup operation and to minimize chemicals that are dispersing the oil. BP said it is committed to spending \$500 million over the next decade to rein in the impact of the oil spill on the Gulf and Gulf coast.

'Minimize the Damage'

"We are committed to making sure we do everything we can to minimize the damage and the impact of the accident in the Gulf of Mexico," [David Nicholas](#), a London-based spokesman for the company, said today in a phone interview.

The exact effects of the slick on the seahorses are hard to predict because not much is known about their total population numbers, Koldewey said. The species is listed as "data deficient" on the "red list" of

endangered species compiled by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Dwarf seahorses are less than an inch long and produce few young, according to the society. The oil spill happened at the time of year when they breed, making the damage to the creatures worse, Koldewey said.

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