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# California Oil Spill



Maddalena Bearzi Oct 4 · 2 min read

## What's the Impact on Dolphins and Whales?



Bottlenose dolphins traveling along the Southern California coastline —  
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The major oil spill off the Orange County coast of California will affect dolphins and whales in different ways, including:

1. Absorption through direct contact at the surface and in the water column;
2. Exposure through ingestion of water while feeding and through ingestion of contaminated prey;
3. Inhalation of harmful fumes while breathing at the surface

The direct and indirect health effects of oil spills are still largely unknown for these animals. Previous studies in other areas where marine mammals have been exposed to petroleum hydrocarbon toxicity (see the BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010), however, highlight some detrimental effects such as lung diseases, compromised immune function, impaired stress response, reduced reproductive success, and mortality.





A Gray whale searching for food just off the Southern California shores —  
image:©maddalenabearzi/ocs (under NOAA permit)

This latest oil spill, first reported Saturday, October 9th, 2021, originated from a pipeline from the coast at Huntington Beach connected to an offshore oil platform called Elly. So far, the failure caused 126,000 gallons of crude oil to spill in nearshore waters producing a slick that already spans over 8,000 acres off California.

At Ocean Conservation Society, I have studied the socially complex and large-brained dolphins and whales off southern California for over two decades. Every week, my research team witnesses the increasingly damaging human-induced effects on these animals.

We humans love dolphins and whales but not enough to respect them and protect the environment in which they live.

This last oil spill is yet another reminder that we need to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels.

How many more reminders we will need?

Maddalena Bearzi has studied the ecology and conservation of marine mammals for over twenty-five years. She is President and Co-founder of the Ocean Conservation Society, and Co-author of Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins (Harvard University Press). She also works as a photo-journalist and blogger for several publications, including the National Geographic. Her latest book is Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist (University of Chicago Press).

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