

Oil Spills, Ethics, and Society: How they intersect and where the responsibilities reside*

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Increasing global demand for energy has forced societies the world over to look for and use ever more diverse and expensive forms of energy to fuel their economies. Oil is a key part of this energy supply, particularly in the arena of transportation fuels. The corporations that supply energy have been pressed into increasingly challenging environments to meet public and governmental demands for inexpensive energy. Unfortunately, as we are reminded by the Gulf of Mexico Deepwater Horizon incident, accidents can happen, the environment can be damaged, and people can lose their lives when we operate at the leading edges of technology.

When accidents occur, our responses typically tend to blame individuals, corporations, or regulators, rather than the public whose demand for cheap, readily available energy forces exploration in new, more challenging frontiers. Public opinions on this subject are shaped by a combination of self-education, fulminating politicians, and aggressive, sensationalist journalists. Exploring more than societal interests at a national level puts our pursuit of inexpensive energy into context. This context pits the competing interests of developing countries, which demand ever increasing shares of the world's resources, against broader, trans-national interests groups which are worried that continued dependence on energy-dense fossil fuels may cause runaway global warming and climate changes that may in turn destroy the earth's ecosystems.

Ultimate responsibilities for oil spills lie within this mix of competing demands and expectations – a mix far more complicated than most people are aware of or are willing to consider. All of us who consume energy have an ethical obligation to educate ourselves, and those around us, on the consequences of our demands for energy and for the environment.