



# OSA-039-Oil Spill-Trinidad & Tobago

*The World Federation for Coral Reef Conservation*  
Vic Ferguson Executive Director

281.971.7703  
512.986.1902

P.O. Box 311117  
[vic.ferguson@wfcrc.org](mailto:vic.ferguson@wfcrc.org)

Houston, TX 77231  
[info@wfcrc.org](mailto:info@wfcrc.org)

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## Oil slick disaster

THE PROOF is in the thick sludge coating the waters off Chaguaramas. We have a barrage of agencies, policies and procedures in place — but they are not working well enough to protect our sensitive marine environment. It's time for an overhaul.

We say we are serious about diversifying the economy. We want more tourism, more marine industry. We say we are solemn about protecting the livelihoods of our fishermen and entrepreneurs.

We say we care about the United Nations' sustainable development goals. Yet, we have not managed to control the wanton pollution along our coastline. And the oil slicks keep happening. When will we learn?

Ongoing efforts to identify the source of the Chaguaramas oil slick must intensify. We must get to the bottom of this latest incident. Who is responsible? What repercussions will they face? How will the clean-up be managed? Who will pay for the rehabilitation of the coastline? Who will compensate the fishermen when the inevitable claims for damage begin to trickle in?

It is unfortunate oil spills are so frequent a reality. Yet, the question must be asked: do we really have adequate equipment to deal with these disasters? Are the current tools being utilised fit for purpose? Is there machinery available that can better assist us whenever these slicks occur? Sadly, we have no reason to believe oil spills will cease based on the experience of the last few years.

Effective monitoring of the Gulf of Paria is needed. Standards should apply. If there are already systems in place, it is time for a review of those systems. Better scrutiny is the key to dealing with what is fast becoming a catastrophic environmental disaster.

Part of the challenge is policing the commercial and private vessels that frequent our waters.

“Every week the big ships discard their waste oil from their bilges and this is what we get,” says environmentalist and head of the Fishermen and Friends of the Sea (FFOS) group, Gary Aboud. Were it not for organisations like

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FFOS, many of these problems would go unnoticed. If we cannot effectively police private shipowners, perhaps lawful lobby groups can be supported to continue to do work that advances the environment.

Thankfully, there are many non-government agencies working to raise awareness about environmental issues. The list includes the FFOS, as well as the Asa Wright Nature Centre, the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute, the Caribbean Youth Environment Network TT Chapter, TT Green Building Council, Environment Tobago, It's Up To Me, Pointe-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust, and the TT Field Naturalists' Club. We salute any work that furthers education about the environment and that takes up the cause.

But all of us should be concerned over the latest developments, not just specialist NGOs. The oil slick can do irreparable damage to our marine environment. Even when the waters once more return to their clear, pristine state, there are untold side-effects that may not be detectable to the naked eye.

Many people in this country—including our parliamentarians—fly out of the country and bask on the shores of foreign exotic isles or lounge on cruise ships, but tens of thousands of ordinary people in this country still bathe off the coast every year. What about the damage to our vital recreational space?

And make no mistake, this oil slick is a public health issue. It has the potential to taint food stock. It has already tainted our waters. Who is monitoring the pollutants in the system? Who is advising the public about the level of contaminants that may be left floating around in the Gulf whenever big business ships belch?

Blood thicker than water, we like to say. Well so is oil. This problem must be addressed. And addressed properly.

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- Coral Alert Network (CAN)
- Emergency Reporting Reports (ERR)
- Call to Action (CTA)
- Marine Protected Areas (MPA)
- Marine Life Alert (MLA)
- Seismic and Oil Production Threats
- Natural Science Reports (NSR)
- Oil Spill Alerts (OSA)
- And other miscellaneous documents

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