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## Cleaning up, one rock at a time

TAEAN -- Sadness, anger and shock was Rick Wakeman's reaction to the oil spill. "My second reaction was, "What am I going to do to help these people?" said the volunteer after a long day of clean-up work on a blackened Pedo-ri beach.

The Dec. 7 oil spill in the waters off Taean has resulted in an outpouring of support from tens of thousands of volunteers, including many local expats.

"I felt sick. My first thought was the people at Pedo-ri beach because I know them very well. I play with their kids and I eat in their homes. For me it was very personal -- about the people more than anything else," said Wakeman, a professor at a university in Asan, South Chungcheong Province.

"These folks need help, they need it now and they need it to be real," he said.



Eleven days after the spill, officials said 638 vessels, 18 aircraft and some 37,000 people were taking part in clean-up efforts. A director with the decontamination office at the Coast Guard said that almost 30 percent of the leaked oil has been collected -- but scientists expect that it will take months of daily efforts to remove a meaningful portion of the oil. And even after that, scientists point to the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska as evidence that it will probably take decades for a full recovery. Over 10,500 tons of crude oil spilled into the ocean after a Samsung barge collided with a Chinese-registered oil supertanker, and each new tide brings more and more oil to the shores of this once-pristine coastline.

In the days since the oil spill, organizers have worked day and night to get volunteers out to the oil-covered beaches 150 kilometers west of Seoul. Wakeman is part of Expat Helping Hands, an organization set up a few years ago to promote volunteer work in Korea.

The group is responsible for getting buses and dozens of foreign volunteers out to participate in the clean-up efforts. On their website, they say that what became apparent after the spill was that expats from all over the peninsula wanted to help, but were unsure how to go about it. Their focus is to "clear a path" for anyone willing to help.

Wakeman described volunteers' efforts: "We were wiping rocks off with rags for about six hours. The oil is concentrated at the tide line and the rocks are covered with gooey gobs of oil. When you dig down, you get to more oil. It's a horrendous mess -- the sand is glistening with oil.

"Then when the tide comes in, it brings more oil with it. I didn't have to move for an hour at a time. I could bend over and clean the rocks around me. I think I spent the day in a two-square meter area scrubbing rocks. We'd like to do more, it's fantastically mind-numbing work. A little depressing because you clean an area and walk away, but

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you look back and you say 'Geez, did I clean that area?' The way you count your progress is how many pieces of oily rags you go through in one day."

Allison Bakker, also of Expat Helping Hands, said that the oil spill is an ecological disaster that will effect the environment, and everyone living there, in ways that most people don't understand. "This is not just a Korean issue, it will affect a lot of people," she added.

Wakeman's group is not alone in its efforts. Another organization, the Korea Federation for Environment Movement, has been organizing busloads of volunteers.

Ma Yong-un, international director for KFEM, said hundreds of foreign volunteers are among the thousands of volunteers that have poured into the region in the last two weeks to help despondent and overwhelmed villagers deal with one of the biggest oil spills that has struck anywhere in the world.

In an interview at the scene of the clean-up, Alycia Kimber, one of the Canadian volunteers, said: "This is my home right now so I want to help." The Toronto native said that she wanted to give something back to the people of Korea because they have been so kind to her. "If something happens like this anywhere, I'd hope that people would pitch in and come together to help."

Her opinion is shared by many foreign residents here, who say that this is not only Korea's problem.

Neil Jasmin, a Vermont native and a military police officer with the U.S. Camp Humphreys, said that he participated in relief efforts on Saturday because this was the first time that a disaster happened so close to where he lived. He said that he plans to return next Saturday with up to 40 other military personal to continue their work.

"When you see it on TV you don't realize the damage. When we see it in person, the realism hits. Every little bit of work helps," he said.

He added, "If Alaska could come back, then why can't Korea? Together we can do anything. The environment is all of our responsibilities."

Duncan Davidson, originally from New Zealand and now living in Yeosu, said "just the fact that it happened" was enough to provoke him into action. Last Saturday he was among the dozens of foreigners helping clean the oil covered beach.

He said that most people are supportive of their efforts. "One good long-term benefit is that it will awake (people) up to environmentalism."

Regarding the safety of the volunteers, Rick Wakeman said that as long as people take proper precautions, safety will not be an issue. He said experts recommend a number of safety measures: Take regular breaks, and don't work longer than three or four hours at a time; always wear a face mask, gloves, boots and a full body protective suit; after working for a day, take two days off; and use proven techniques to clean the oil.

"If you wear the right mask and protect yourself, it makes a difference. There is no imminent danger to people working in the clean-up as long as you get up and get some fresh air away from the oil," Wakeman said. He pointed out that many people involved in the Exxon Valdez spill are now dying because proper safety procedures were ignored in an effort to get the job done as fast as possible.

"In two months from now it's not going to be over and we need everyone in this country and the world to pay attention to it. For as long as I'm alive, and as long as those people at Pedo-ri beach are fighting, I will be there."

He said volunteers will be needed for months, if not years, in order to restore the region to its former beauty.

"It's very pretty when it's not covered with oil."

To contact Expat Helping Hands, visit [www.expathh.wordpress.com](http://www.expathh.wordpress.com). To contact the Korea Federation for Environment Movement, go to [www.kfem.or.kr](http://www.kfem.or.kr).

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By Matthew Lamers

2007.12.20



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