

Remembering the Sea Empress

Twenty years ago, on the evening of 15 February 1996, a large oil tanker, the Sea Empress, grounded on rocks while attempting to enter the Milford Haven waterway at low tide. Gordon James, who at the time was director of Friends of the Earth Cymru and an active member of Pembrokeshire FoE, looks back.

There was little evidence of a major oil spill as a small group of us, gathered on St Anna's Head, gazed down through the early morning light at the damaged oil tanker. On this first dawn of an unfolding drama, it was rumoured that everything was under control and the becalmed *Sea Empress* would soon be moved to the safety of an oil terminal.

A few months earlier, a Norwegian tanker, the *Borga*, had grounded nearby, and had been pulled off by tugs with no loss of oil. It was this incident that had alerted Friends of the Earth to problems at this major oil port. We received, from an anonymous source, a report, drafted by local tugboat crews, calling for a Government review of safety at Milford Haven following cost-cutting proposals. We learned that local marine pilots had similar concerns.

I had been discussing these issues with an oil pollution expert on the evening of Thursday 15th February at a meeting in Narberth. Then, when I arrived home, there it was on the 10 o'clock news; another fully-laden tanker had grounded at the entrance to Milford Haven.

As the weather deteriorated over the next few days, the *Sea Empress* was allowed to remain close to the headland where rocks ripped larger holes into its hull, allowing thousands of tonnes of crude oil to spew out to contaminate one of Europe's most valuable marine environments and spectacular coastlines.

The immensity of the impact of this tragedy was now becoming clear to a horrified local population. I remember seeing people weep at the sight of golden sandy beaches being smothered under a black mass of oil and seabirds making pathetic and useless efforts to heave their tarred bodies out of it. Many people, including volunteers from Pembrokeshire FoE, waded into the foul smelling sea in an effort to rescue the birds.

Inshore fishermen and those working in the tourist industry suddenly faced a frightening and uncertain future. Workmen battled in filthy conditions to physically remove oil from beaches and shorelines, often seeing their good work being undone by the next incoming tide. Marine scientists tried to calculate the ecological impact of the pollution. And the world's media gathered in increasing numbers to watch, broadcast and report.

A week later, following considerable controversy about the unavailability of suitable salvage tugs, the tanker was finally pulled off the rocks and taken to a jetty in the Haven. Those of us on the headland suspected something special was happening as the stench of oil suddenly increased suggesting that some might have been let out deliberately to lighten the tanker.

Friends of the Earth began collecting evidence from shipping and salvage experts in preparation for a legal challenge. We had become aware that the port radar had been malfunctioning for some time and that the former chief pilot at Milford Haven, Capt Ian Evans, had complained that the Port Authority had put non-marine investments before its prime duty to maintain, improve and regulate navigation in the Haven.

Quoted in a local paper [The Western Telegraph, p3., March 20, 1996], Capt Evans said that leading lights were inadequate and, "I believe that had there been such leading lights then the initial grounding of the *Sea Empress* would not have occurred".

We also learned that the local pilots who had boarded the vessel after the initial grounding believed that they could have taken the tanker either up the Haven to a jetty or out to sea where the bulk of the oil could have been offloaded to other tankers, thus avoiding most of the pollution that occurred. These local experts were not listened to and the *Sea Empress* was left in the worst possible place as the weather deteriorated.

The expert evidence we accumulated and our threat to pursue a private prosecution were instrumental, we believe, in persuading the Environment Agency to take successful legal action against the Port Authority. We handed over to them the evidence we had gathered.

The official report into the oil spill concluded, "We were lucky - it could have been much worse" [1]. It pointed out that the northerly winds blew most of the oil offshore, where 40% of it evaporated; that the huge colonies of sea birds had not returned to the Pembrokeshire islands and coastline to breed; and that the spill happened outside the main tourist season. The clean-up operation, it concluded, was generally well-managed, planned and executed with the main beaches being cleaned successfully before the Easter holiday season.

Yes, we were lucky, but, if those with the greatest expertise in bringing tankers in and out of the Haven had been listened to, the disaster might never have happened.

ENDS

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1. The Sea Empress Environmental Evaluation Committee press release on Wednesday 11th of February 1998