

Oceana scientists research oil spill effects on sharks

Photo by Carlos Suarez



The Oceana Latitude has been deployed to study life underwater in the gulf after the BP oil spill.

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They have deployed [underwater sensors](#) in the area where the [oil rig](#) exploded and collapsed nearly five months ago, spewing 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

They have used [underwater cameras](#) to check out an area called the Alabama Alps. They have sent divers down to look for evidence of dead sea life on the floor of the Gulf.

Now scientists will be going [shark fishing](#) next week to see what effects, if any, the nation's worst [oil disaster](#) has had on those creatures.

"I think the picture is still cloudy," said Michael Hirshfield, the [chief scientist](#) at Oceana, an [international conservation group](#) based in Washington, D.C. "One of the things we know is that death is not necessarily immediate. There can be slow deaths and slow problems."

[Hirshfield](#) made his comments earlier this week aboard the [Oceana Latitude](#) as it was about 20 miles off the shore of Mobile, Ala. The ship is expected to dock in St. Petersburg this weekend as the crew gets ready for the next leg involving sharks.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, scientists from [Oceana](#) and the [National Aquarium](#) will team up to head into the Gulf to fish for sharks.

"We'll have to see what we can catch," said Elizabeth Wilson, a [marine scientist](#) and fisheries campaign manager for Oceana. "Our hope is we can find hammerhead and bull sharks."

The sharks will be measured, logged and tagged and released back into the Gulf. If they are ever caught again, researchers can compare the original data. They can see how much they have grown, where they have moved to, and if they have suffered any ill health effects.

"It's a big unknown, but it is definitely something that I am concerned about," Wilson said of possible consequences from the oil in the Gulf.

The 170-foot Latitude vessel has been at sea in the Gulf since earlier this month and will be at sea until early October, except for the brief pit stop in St. Petersburg.

So far, scientists have not found anything startling or disturbing, [Hirshfield](#) said.

"We all notice the sharks and the whales and the turtles and the seabirds when an accident like this happens," he explained. "If they die, it's pretty visible. It's the worms and the little tiny things that are at the bottom of the food chain that matter a lot to the rest of the Gulf ecosystem. If they die, we're not going to notice it."

[Hirshfield](#) is especially concerned with a species known as menhaden – a fish that people don't eat but everything else in the Gulf does, from snapper to grouper to blue-fin tuna, among other species. Menhaden take in a lot of water through their bodies by filtering out smaller food particles.

"It will be a year or so until we know," the [chief scientist](#) said. "Its purpose in life is to be eaten. If there is an effect on it, we may not see it until next year, and it could ripple through the food chain."

For now, scientists from Oceana, the University of South Florida and countless other organizations are scouring the Gulf for clues from the April 20 Deepwater Horizon disaster.

"We're all trying to find pieces of the jigsaw puzzle," [Hirshfield](#) said. "But unfortunately we don't have the top of the box."