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Expanding our Perspective on Environmental Risk Management

The recent Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico has resulted in the largest off-shore oil spill in recorded history. Efforts to contain the spill are on-going yet the most promising solution, the drilling of relief wells, will not be completed until August at the earliest. With estimates of daily flow ranging from 12,000 to 100,000 barrels it is unfortunate to say that the spill is far from over. Until more data are available any discussion of the ecological, economic, social, and cultural consequences of this spill would be speculative, but suffice to say that the consequences will be significant.

One issue that the spill does bring up which can be discussed with greater certainty is that of risk management. A risk, whether it is environmental, social, or economic, can be thought of as the probability of an event occurring in combination with the probability of people caring about such an occurrence. In other words, a risk is a social creation and how we, as society, perceive risks determines how we manage risks. Regulators operate with finite resources and time and must manage risks accordingly—priority is established not by universal law but rather by social consciousness.

When it comes to environmental risks, regulators must respond to the technical risks as identified and acknowledged by those involved, as well as the risks so perceived by society. Compounding this reality is the fact that social environmental consciousness is increasingly driven by special interest groups. These groups rely predominantly on donations and grants for continued operation and as such are required to drive certain fads and fashions of environmentalism in order to remain applicable to ever evolving social tastes.

Through a combination of international treaties, celebrity endorsements, and on-point messaging by advocate groups there is no denying that greenhouse gas emissions are considered the principal environmental risk of our day. There is also no denying that greenhouse gas emissions are a serious environmental risk—but they are only one facet of any system under investigation. In the case of oil production, very few environmental risks are ever publicly discussed apart from the rather large corresponding contribution of greenhouse gas emissions. By shifting our collective conscience toward the monitoring of greenhouse gas emissions other potential risks must necessarily be moved down on the priority list or even ignored all together.

From accounts to date it would seem that the potential emissions of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig were well documented and tracked yet this same rig appears to have garnered hundreds of safety violations over the last few years which are only now coming under public scrutiny.

The key message here is that contemporary environmentalism is predominantly issue specific whereas environmental risks and consequences are systemic. A trajectory towards greater sustainability requires

a change of perspective, one which accounts for a system's complete environmental footprint rather than simply one facet *du jour*.

The oil spill serves as a stark reminder of the multitude of potential risks involved in any such system. Once the data are collected, the actual greenhouse gas emissions may pale in comparison to the contamination, loss of animal life and habitat and associated human livelihoods, such as fishing and tourism. It is time to take a step back from the fads and fashions of environmentalism and rather internalize a broader environmental footprint perspective so as to be able to recognize, prioritize, and manage the environmental risks which our modern lifestyles entail.

One may argue that the adoption of a broader perspective of environmental risks, as opposed to focusing predominantly on singular characteristics, may not have led to different regulations and oversight of off-shore oil drilling, and thus not have prevented the current calamity; but certainly it would not have made things any worse.

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