



## UNITED HOUMA NATION, INC.

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## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Existence of United Houma Nation in Peril**

The United Houma Nation (UHN), an indigenous nation numbering approximately 17,000 along coastal, southeast Louisiana, is at high risk of cultural extermination as a result of the immediate and long-term effects of the British Petroleum Gulf of Mexico oil disaster. The Tribe, first encountered by LaSalle in 1682, has existed in the bayous and rivers of central South Louisiana long before Louisiana became a state and New Orleans became a French colony (for a complete history and description go to [www.unitedhoumanation.org](http://www.unitedhoumanation.org)). Tribal citizens have been living, hunting, fishing, shrimping, crabbing, oystering, and

trapping fur bearing animals in the coastal marshes and wetlands of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, Lafourche, Terrebonne and St. Mary Parishes in Louisiana before American recorded history began. Most of these Houma communities exist outside of hurricane protection levees and are at constant risk from normal tidal flooding and tropical storm and hurricane storm surges. Houmas live along the coast because of its closeness to the marine resources from which their living is made. The identity of the Houma Nation is closely tied to the lands and the waters of coastal Louisiana. Tribal leadership recognized immediately the dire ramifications of this event - all aspects of Houma culture and livelihood are in jeopardy from this oil disaster.

The United Houma Nation is a Louisiana state recognized tribe. In 1979, the Tribe petitioned the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) for federal recognition. Thirty-one years later, the federal government has yet to approve its petition for acknowledgement. With the tribe's petition with the BIA tied up in procedural red tape, the UHN has attempted many times to seek recognition through the legislative process. As a matter of record, the relationship between the UHN and the oil and gas industry has been an adversarial one fraught with industry representatives vehemently opposing the tribe's attempts for federal acknowledgment in the past. For a complete description of our fight for recognition, please visit [www.unitedhoumanation.org](http://www.unitedhoumanation.org).

While many Native American tribes along the coasts of America and in particular, the Gulf coast have branched out into gaming and farming and various industries not related directly to the estuarine resources of the tidal marshes, the Houma Nation has stayed true to its traditional economic relationship of fishing the estuaries of coastal Louisiana. The relationship between the Houma and resources of the coast is a sacred one. As this time of year is the traditional fishing season for tribal citizens, an impending financial disaster is at hand. Not only are tribal citizens both directly and indirectly dependent on the commercial fishing industry affected, but UHN tribal citizens harvest palmettos in the coastal marshes for basket weaving traditions, harvest garfish for their scales to make traditional jewelry, Spanish moss for traditional doll making and many other herbs

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and plants for traditional medicinal remedies used by tribal *traiteurs* (treaters – traditional healers). All of these traditions are in danger of disappearing once the continuing flow of oil infiltrates the inner coastal marshes and wetlands of the six parishes identified above where nearly 90% of tribal citizens currently reside.

The single largest and most productive estuarine system in North America is located within the tribal service area. The marine bio-productivity of these coastal parishes dwarf the combined resources of both the Chesapeake and Everglades combined. For the best description and evidence of the resources in these estuaries, please visit the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program at [www.btnep.org](http://www.btnep.org). To put this oil and gas well blowout into perspective, the Transocean Horizon was one of nearly 3,500 platforms operating in the Gulf of Mexico from Mississippi to Texas. The oil pouring out of the blown out well at a conservative rate of some 210,000 gallons per day is from but one well of the 4,500 wells in the Gulf of Mexico. Already it is estimated the amount of oil that has been shot into the Gulf from the blow out is greater than the Exxon Valdez.

The Louisiana coast is not the Alaska coast. Louisiana's coastal plain is mostly at sea level with already deteriorating wetlands due in large part to oil and gas activities beginning in the 1930's. There are few natural barriers left in Louisiana to buffer or protect coastal marshes from inundation of the oil spewing from the former Horizon. The impact of the spill is already catastrophic to tribal fishermen. The oil has spread west of the Mississippi River. UHN fishermen cannot sustain the losses of just one fishing season, much less several seasons if impacts are long term. All indications are that the effects will last years if not decades. With such dire but very real predictions, UHN fishermen will cease to exist.

It is without question and simple science that the oil spill will affect the estuaries within which UHN fishermen make their living. Surface oil enters our coastal marshes through natural currents and tidal flows. These tidal regimes of ebb and flow bring both surface oil and subsurface oil (in the water column) into these wetlands and marsh areas. Once the tides ebb, the oil clings to and completely coats the marsh grasses, thereby killing all vegetation. The killing of

wetland vegetation prevents fish, shrimp, crab, oysters and offshore finfish and migratory species such as red snapper, yellow fin and blue fin tuna, wahoo, king mackerel, mahi mahi, grouper, amberjack, tarpon and many other species from reproducing because these marshes are where these species spawn their young and receive protection from natural predators. In addition, these marshes are home to already diminishing sea mammals such as mink, otter, muskrat, etc. Once the vegetation is dead, mud plains poisoned with oil will turn to open water, thereby eliminating critical habitat. Yet again a simple matter of science, open water is less productive than wetlands.

There is talk among scientists and industry spokesmen about using fresh waters from the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers to flush out the entire estuarine system between the two rivers as a way of combating the entering oil. On the surface this seems like a good idea. However, talk by these “experts” is something the UHN citizens have been hearing for many years. Currently, small diversions exist along these rivers. The largest diversion opportunities are the spillways. Unfortunately the continuing oil spill and size of its spread is so large (and growing every day at the same rate it began) there may not be enough diversionary capacity to make a significant impact on these estuaries at this time. This may be best used as a remediation tool to repair damage done by the spill. The time for using this method of “estuary flushing” as a preventative tool has probably passed. For the UHN this discussion is much like *déjà vu* of talk about wetlands restoration – much talk with little action and always too late for UHN citizens. UHN citizens live in communities which exist at or below sea level. Most tribal citizens’ homesteads are highly susceptible to flooding from normal spring and summer tidal regimes. The incoming oil could potentially force people from their homes in areas such as Isle de Jean Charles, Pointe aux Chenes, Dulac, Cocodrie, Leeville, Grand Isle, Lafitte, and others.

Most tribal fishermen are “day trawlers”. They operate small skiffs and boats that ply the inland waters of the estuaries described above. Most take their boats out at daybreak each morning and fish during the day, returning by late afternoon to sell their catch of shrimp, fish, crab, and oysters. Any disruption in

this daily tradition is quite costly to them. Sustained closures of their fishing grounds due to oil contamination, much of the traditional Houma lifestyle may cease to exist. Current projections by coastal scientists describe an almost certain inundation of saline and brackish marshes by oil from this BP/Horizon disaster.

More worrisome is the fact that we are at the doorstep of the Atlantic hurricane season. Given current projections of a continuing uncontrolled oil flow for 30 to 90 days, oil could still be flowing into the gulf at the height of the hurricane season. In the past 9 years, the UHN's coastal communities have been deeply affected by major Hurricanes George, Edouard, Lily, Isidore, Ivan (twice), Cindy, Rita, Katrina, Ike and Gustav. Statistically speaking, Louisiana has a better than even chance of being impacted by tropical storms and hurricanes this coming season. Projections by NOAA show a greater than average season in the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico for storms in 2010. The entire UHN community along the Louisiana coast is disastrously vulnerable to widespread inundation of oil soaked waters as far as 20 to 30 miles or more into the Barataria and Terrebonne estuaries from storm surges, should a tropical system enter or develop in the Gulf. A storm or hurricane coming ashore west of Louisiana before the oil flow is capped and existing surface and subsurface oil cleaned up, would flood these communities with an oily waste storm surge, similar to the Murphy Oil incident during Hurricane Katrina in St. Bernard Parish. Residents' homesteads had to be purchased by Murphy Oil. These properties are uninhabitable to this day. Many tribal leaders fear that if UHN tribal citizens have to move away from their coastal communities because of oil contamination, the United Houma Nation way of life will cease to exist. As a society, the American people have decided it is important to protect wildlife and the flora and fauna of this great country through something called the Endangered Species Act. Although a bit tongue in cheek, the UHN fears that a once proud, independent people need the Endangered Native American Cultures Act.