Project Update: November 2006

Guimaras Island, Philippines is experiencing one of the worst disastrous oil spills in the history of the Southeast Asian region. On a stormy afternoon of August 11, 2006, the Solar 1 oil tanker sank 12 km off Guimaras Island. An estimated 200,000 to 300,000 litres of spilled oil has contaminated a 24 km2 zone of this fragile small island ecosystem. Solar 1 was carrying some 2.4 million litres of bunker oil fuel.

The oil spill is directly threatening the coastal inhabitants and communities, including the seagrass beds, which are the feeding grounds of a fragmented dugong population in Guimaras Island. The most damaged coastal community is the mangrove forest. The effects of this oil spill have been immense on all aspects: environment (affected 12 ha of seagrasses, 16 km2 of coral reefs, ~432-1,000 ha of mangroves), economic (lost most of the island's economic drivers like fishing and tourism activities; e.g. affected 58 ha of seaweed farms, 824 ha of fishponds) social (affected ~ 5,000 families) and health (at least 100 patients have been treated for respiratory related ailments). The local (municipal and provincial) governments of Guimaras in collaboration with several local and international organizations have started a long term rehabilitation program.

Before this environmental disaster, the dugong was already in dire situation as there were just too many passive fishing gears spread all over the island increasing the chances of a dugong getting trapped or entangled with (see photo). This new twist in the plight of these sea cows in this small island province may farther hinder their chances of surviving in this area as the effects of the spilled oil on seagrass is very difficult to monitor more so if via foraging by these large marine herbivores. It is hoped that RSG will continue to fund this project to allow monitoring of the effects of the Solar 1 oil spill on the dugongs in Guimaras and its habitats – seagrass meadows.

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