



## Protecting Our Past



Fort Massachusetts, Gulf Islands National Seashore

### Making history

History is being made today, as the National Park Service participates in the largest oil spill response on record. That the Deepwater Horizon oil spill will influence our natural world is no surprise—but it will also affect the cultural resources that tie us to our past. The National Park Service is working to protect these cultural resources and our shared cultural heritage not only in national parks threatened by the oil spill but also across the entire oil spill response area.

### Cultural resources of the Gulf Coast

The cultural resources found in our national parks tell the stories of key people, places, and events in our nation's history. Along the Gulf Coast, shipwrecks speak of dreams dashed on shallow sandbars. Shell middens hold evidence of past

lifestyles. Weathered piers tell of trade and travel. Brick forts hark back to the evolution of seacoast defense. Our heritage is part of who we were, who we are, and who we will be—and so we work to protect these cultural resources.

### Threats to cultural resources

Cultural resources may be affected by direct oiling—or by clean-up efforts, which pose the greatest threat. Resources in the water and on the beaches, such as shipwrecks, are most vulnerable to direct oiling. Other resources near the shore may be affected when high tides or storm waves carry oily water, tarballs, or other oil byproducts onto the beach. The effects of oil vary depending on the type of material and the condition it is in—sun-dried wood, for example, may absorb the oil more readily than shells in middens.

Efforts to clean up the oil may inadvertently damage cultural resources. Digging in the sand to remove oil may weaken already fragile foundations or cause buried objects to shift. Crews may unintentionally trample objects or disturb archeological sites. To avoid such accidental injury, Resource Advisors (READs) accompany clean-up crews in all NPS sites, making crew members aware of the type and location of sensitive cultural (and natural) resources. To clean up near historic structures and archeological sites, crews use low-impact methods, such as hand tools rather than mechanized equipment.

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## NPS sites

Using a measured response that strives to balance the sensitivity of the resource with the need to respond to oil impacts, the NPS is working hard to protect cultural resources in parks.

We must understand where our cultural resources are and what condition they are in before we can protect them. To do this, we assemble previously collected information from various sources, including the National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmarks, the Archeological Sites Management Information System, and the List of Classified Structures. Crews perform baseline condition assessments of these resources to determine their condition prior to oiling; these pre-assessments were completed for NPS cultural resources threatened by the oil spill within the first few weeks after the incident began. This information lets us know the state to restore them to, if restoration is possible after oiling.

The first line of defense for any resource along the coast is the placement of booms used to prevent oil from reaching the shoreline. These long, buoyant strands of plastic or absorbent material are deployed off the coast to intercept floating oil.

Stormy weather may decrease the effectiveness of booms, allowing oil to make landfall. Another method of protection for sites that haven't been oiled but remain vulnerable is to fully bury sites with a thick layer of sand to prevent oil from reaching them.

Despite much hard work, oil has reached barrier islands along the Gulf Coast from Louisiana to Florida. Archeology READs are visiting NPS beaches with known archeological resources to document their current condition and assess the level of oiling, if any. Technical working groups (composed of historic preservation specialists, archeologists, and others) are developing recommendations for cleaning. Researchers have taken samples back to the lab to determine how to clean oil off different surfaces and to answer questions such as whether radiocarbon dating (to determine age) will be possible after oiling. This testing is essential to ensure that we do not cause any additional harm in the cleaning process. If removing the oil will cause more damage, the best option might be to leave the oil in place. In all cases, if cleaning is performed on or near sensitive cultural resources, a cultural resource specialist must be present.

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## Oil spill response area efforts

NPS staff are coordinating the Section 106 response for the entire Deepwater Horizon oil spill incident. Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires federal agencies to take into account the effects that federally funded activities and programs have on significant historic properties—those properties included in, or eligible for, the National Register of Historic Places. Because oil spill response activities may affect National Register eligible or listed properties throughout the response area, the Unified Area Command (UAC) has created a Section 106 response team.

The team is overseen by a historic properties specialist from the NPS who reports to the UAC Federal On-Scene Coordinator. The three incident command posts under the UAC (in Houma, Louisiana; Mobile, Alabama; and Miami, Florida) have teams of specialists—including State Historic Preservation Office liaisons, tribal liaisons, data managers, ethnographers, archeologists, historic architects, and others who work together to perform Section 106 compliance activities. This involves not only assessing the resources that are out there and trying to ensure they are protected but also finding the best methods for restoring them to their baseline condition.

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## More information

Learn more about the oil spill response:

[www.nps.gov/aboutus/oil-spill-response.htm](http://www.nps.gov/aboutus/oil-spill-response.htm)  
[www.restorethegulf.gov](http://www.restorethegulf.gov)



Shipwreck on beach