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Effects of the spill may linger for years

By Grace Chua

Shore and marine life will feel the impact of last Tuesday's oil spill for some time to come, experts here have said.

The disaster, meanwhile, has galvanised environmentalists and other members of the public into volunteering their time to rescue shore creatures and documenting the spill.

The spill, which tipped some 2,500 tonnes of crude oil into the ocean off Changi East, has slicked creatures such as crabs at East Coast and sea snails at Changi Beach.

The affected beaches – which, besides the Chek Jawa wetlands, are largely reclaimed land – have mostly been cleaned up.

Their shoreline ecosystems harbour life like peanut and acorn worms, sea snails, ghost and hermit crabs, and even a patch of coral at the Tanah Merah seawall.

When oil slicks hit, they prevent corals from getting enough sunlight, cut off oxygen by coating plants and fish gills, and harbour volatile organic compounds that can poison marine life, explained marine biologist Chou Loke Ming.

If most of the oil is removed, the impact from poisons and a lack of oxygen can be reduced, Professor Chou said, but spraying dispersant chemicals can break up the oil into smaller droplets which can sink to the bottom and affect marine life deeper in the sea.

In the longer term, how long will shores take to recover? Marine life may take three to four years, depending on the severity of the impact, Prof Chou said.

Commenting on how long oil from a spill lingers in the environment, climate expert Michael Totten, of international non-governmental organisation Conservation International, said that would depend on the type of oil, location, currents and weather conditions.

For instance, more than 98 tonnes of oil from 1989 Exxon Valdez spill off Alaska still lingers in the sands of Prince William Sound, as the remote area was hard for clean-up teams to reach.

The recent oil spill has also prodded members of the public into action.

Volunteers from environmental groups like ECO Singapore and the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) have been hard at work cleaning up shores and rescuing animals since Thursday. And ordinary people have visited the affected shores at low tide to document the damage.

Last Friday, some 20 volunteers from Acres and ECO Singapore spent hours at East Coast Park. Oil has seeped into the sand and there was a smell in the air as volunteers dug out oil-covered crabs and shellfish.

The work attracted attention and help from beachgoers, even those who had never heard of the animal-issues or environmental groups.

Miss Jenny Chan, 40, and Miss Joyce Lee, 39, were cycling along a path when they saw Acres' sign calling for volunteers, stopped out of curiosity, and decided to stay and help.

Over the weekend, the same groups were helping out at Pulau Ubin's Chek Jawa shore and Changi Beach, both of which were hit by oil slicks on Friday.

Environmentalists like Wild Singapore's Ria Tan have been visiting shores from Changi to East Coast to document the damage and help check for new slicks.

Their reports appear on nature blogs, as well as a Facebook page dedicated to the Changi East oil spill.