Researchers warn that current could still bring oil to area

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Just back from a research expedition that tested marine habitats below the thick sludge of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Dr. Tamara Frank told a Delray Beach audience that the disaster was "the biggest peacetime oil spill ever" and that local habitats are not yet out of harm's way.

"Compared to Exxon Valdez with 11 million gallons, when Deepwater Horizon was recently capped, 206 million gallons of oil had already leaked, and the cap is still leaking lightly," said Frank, an associate research professor at Florida Atlantic University's Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute. "This is the deepest oil spill ever. Most oil spills happen near land, but this oil spill happened in the open ocean."

Speaking at the September meeting of the Alliance of Delray Residential Associations, Frank said the Deepwater Horizon spill occurred about a mile below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico. She said even though media reports are showing that dispersants have cleaned most of the oil off the surface of the gulf, there is much oil below the surface that is harming marine habitats.

Frank told residents the local coastline is not out of the clear, due to the powerful loop current that swoops around Florida's southern peninsula and up the East Coast.

Frank said the expedition, which included several other scientists and graduate students, traveled from the Dry Tortugas west of Key West to the West Florida Shelf and Pulley Ridge. After a brief stop in St. Petersburg, the Seward Johnson visited the West Florida Shelf and headed up to the Madison Swanson area of northwest Florida.

"We spent a month studying fish habitats and doing baseline studies," Frank said. "We studied zooplankton, how light affects bottom water habitats, stressors on corals, water chemistry, reproduction of juveniles in the marine habitat, eggs, larvae and hydrocarbons in the water that came from the spill."

While Frank said she and her team still have a lot of research to examine, she said the oil spill will be bothersome to the marine habitat for years to come.
"This is the first time dispersants were used to break up the oil underwater when in turn what the dispersants did is push the oil plume down farther below the surface," she said.

What's more alarming, Frank said, is that the Gulf of Mexico is the largest spawning ground in the world for blue fin tuna.

"Fish can swim away from the oil spill," she said, "but eggs and larvae cannot."