ST. LUCIE COUNTY — When high school students consider the cost of the BP-generated oil spill deep beneath the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, they see more than just a giant oil slick floating on the water.

They see oil-soaked birds, damaged coral, a fishing industry out of business, billions of dollars spent to cap the well, greed, a lack of interest in the environment by the older generation, declining tourism, and effects lasting into the foreseeable future.

Students from the Marine Oceanographic Academy on the campus of Harbor Branch in northern St. Lucie County just finished two weeks of researching and considering the environmental consequences, political history and the economics of drilling for underwater oil.

The project was a good fit for the school because of students’ interest in the health of the oceans and the environment, said school Administrator Mary Gregory.

The findings were presented in a symposium at the school on Thursday by 41 teams from 9th, 10th, and 11th grades.

“My group found that 31 years ago, when the Ixtoc oil spill happened in the Gulf of Mexico, it took them nine months to stop the flow of oil,” said sophomore Sam Jones-Bankston, 15, who worked with three other students on the ‘British Problem’ team. “And that was in water that was only 200 feet deep. The BP spill is 5,000 feet deep.”

The team, which also included Jonathan Taylor, Megan Ryan and Taylor White, all in 10th grade, used PVC pipe, compressed air, and water to show how relief wells drilled next to the oil-spewing blown well took the pressure off so that the damaged well could be capped off.

The students presented their project 31 years to the day after the Ixtoc well blew and sent 134 million gallons of oil out into the Gulf.
“Our team focused on that all this has happened before,” said Jonathan Taylor. “BP is actually drilling two relief wells right now, just like they did back then. But imagine doing this in 5,000 feet. What we’re afraid of is that if it took them 9 months 31 years ago, how long will it take them this time?”

The students said they believe that the relief wells are the real solution to the spill, and that all the other things BP is trying to block off the well are just window dressing to make the public think something useful is being done.

“They are struggling to find a solution because this has never happened in such deep water before,” Bankston-Jones said. “They never had a solution to begin with and they just hoped nothing like this would ever happen.”

One of the 11th grade teams, who called their project Solar Energy: the Sunshine State’s Future, placed themselves in 2020 and created a skit with a script in which they concluded that “solar thermal energy power plants can bring us to the next step where we are 100 percent free of fossil fuels,” said Shemme Lee, 17.

She worked with Manushka Noelus, Crystal Hills, and Nadia Miller, all 17.

The girls said their research led them to believe that there were multiple signs well in advance of the spill that BP could have heeded.

“I learned that they could have taken initial precautions instead of worrying about how much money they were going to make,” Nadia Miller said.

Manushka Noelus said she discovered that, according to a newspaper story, Florida’s tourism was off by 30 percent already, and that the team believes that by 2020, lingering effects of the spill will reduce tourism to 50 percent of what it was before the spill. Lung damage from breathing oil is also likely, she said.

“There were a lot of events that led up to this,” said Shemme Lee. “We learned that more money for the oil industry comes at everyone’s expense.”