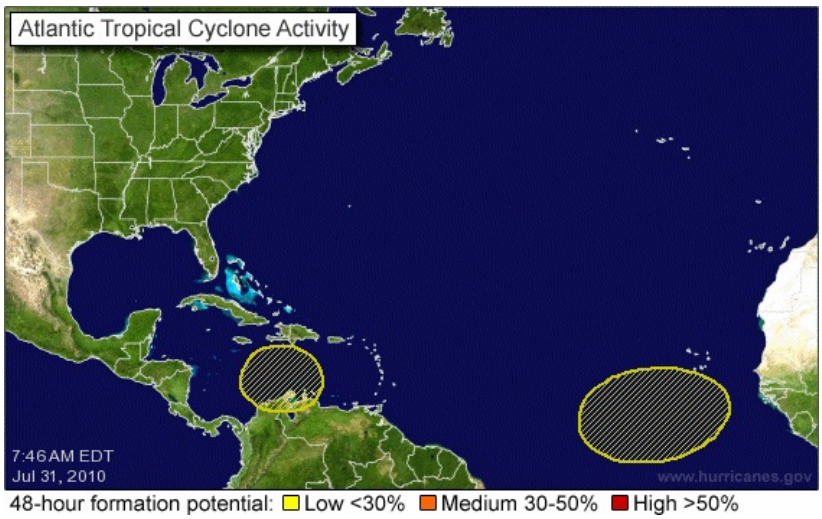
The Oil Drum
DISCUSSIONS ABOUT ENERGY AND OUR FUTURE

BP's Deepwater Oil Spill - Windows Can be Short, a Delay, and a Digression - and Open Thread

Posted by Heading Out on July 31, 2010 - 10:45am
Topic: Environment/Sustainability
Tags: deepwater horizon, oil spill [list all tags]

The windows that allow significant work on the oil spill in the Gulf are likely to become rarer and more valuable opportunities as the hurricane season, forecast to be stronger than average, moves towards its mid-point. While the starting signals for a hurricane don't begin by looking that ominous, and those initial signals don't always grow into a significant threat, as Bonnie just demonstrated, the last thing that can be afforded in this disaster is complacency. And so, as plans are laid out for a methodical approach to sealing the Deepwater well, so we see two more possible threats appear on the horizon.



There is now a delay in both the relief well and the static kill because of some settlement in the relief well when work was temporarily halted for Bonnie. The Oil & Gas Journal write up says:

-journal/general-interest-2/hse/2010/07/_static-kill__on_macondo/QP129867/cmpid=EnlDailyJuly302010.html">Oil & Gas Journal write up says:

> BP PLC is cleaning some debris from the bottom of the first relief well being drilled to intercept the Macondo well, and the "static kill" probably will be delayed until Aug. 3, National Incident Commander and retired US Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen said.
>
> The static kill initially was planned for Aug. 2 although Allen had suggested it possibly could happen sooner than that depending upon how fast the Development Driller III

> semisubmersible could run its final casing. On July 30, Allen said cleaning out the debris would delay the static kill for 24-36 hr.
>
> "Some of the sediment around the side walls just settled in on itself," Allen said. "It's not a huge problem, but it has to be removed before we put the casing down."

There is now some curiosity on where all the supposedly spilled oil went (some of which might be explained by the ramp up in flow as the BOP eroded so that in the earlier stages of the disaster there might have been significantly less oil escaping into the Gulf than the flow levels seen at the time of the capping), but there is not a lot of new information. And so, with your indulgence, a little digression.

One of the reasons that I write is to help explain why things are being done the way that they are, and how technical processes now being used to produce fossil fuels came to happen. Early in my experience of doing this I discovered that you can really help ease a descriptive explanation by using the right illustration. As a result my classroom type lectures are now made up with many more illustrations than they are with word-intensive Power Point slides. Yet, to be honest, that knowledge came, in part, from the memories of my childhood, and my still fond recollections of reading historical fiction where, if I was lucky, the story would be illustrated with four or five illustrations of the action. (And it was the presence of those illustrations that often drove the selection of the books that I borrowed from the local library).

Many of these early stories were illustrated by N.C. Wyeth and it was his teacher, Howard Pyle, who noted that "Pictures are highly important for children, well worth a thousand words, especially if they don't understand 800 of them. First graders know 6,000 words, adults 30,000 or more." This remains true with older audiences where the technologies being discussed are a little arcane, where the artisans of this new era use words that are not in the common lexicon.

And so, having the chance at the end of the family vacation, today we dropped by the Brandywine River Museum, where for the second time in the last month we spent almost from opening to closing time, wandering around the galleries. (The other was the Peabody Essex in Salem, a more conventional museum and thus a totally different experience).

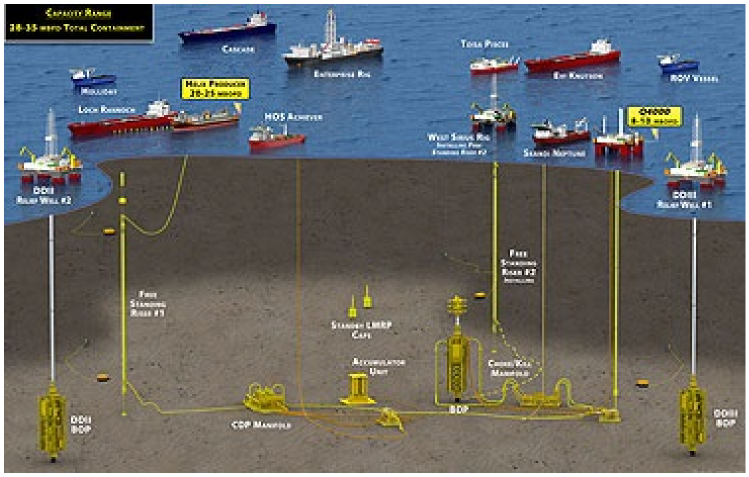
The Wyeths are a legend in American art, with the major focus being on Andrew and Jamie, and indeed the tour we lucked into joining and given by Andrew's grand-daughter Victoria focused very much on those two with wonderful, and unique insights. (We went out to the Kuerner Farm that Andrew painted, and also up to the House and Studio that N.C. built; both of which were well worthwhile, and seeing the "backset" with some of the props held a fascination that could have used a lot more time than we had available).

Having stayed across the street in the Brandywine River Hotel, and eaten dinners at the two immediately local restaurants, we have had a really enjoyable break, and one that I would really recommend.

The art of illustration has, to a large extent, been lost over the last half-century even though there are programs such as Poser, Bryce and Vue; tools that folks such as I (who needs two rulers, a computer and a drawing table to create a straight line) can use to make our less mechanical ideas visual. (I use Strata for my mine models.)

It is no less critical now than it was in Howard Pyle and N.C.'s days that folk understand what the words are trying to say. Witness that Kent Wells uses illustrations and animations to help explain

the complexities of the processes being planned at the Gulf.



Example of an illustration by Kent Wells, from the [BP website](#).

Our family argue about ranking the members of the Wyeth family and their work, but the legacy of illustration that Howard Pyle and his students grew, and which N.C. Wyeth came to be a master of, brought his work and the pleasure of viewing it to more folk than I suspect have been influenced by his later family. Wyeth and the critics of his time downplayed the role of the illustrator, but it is an honorable and indeed vital need that we, who communicate information, have and make use of.

Sadly I don't think that nearly enough technical teams across the board of technical application take the trouble to phrase their talks with illustrations, so that those outside of the "select few" that are masters of the technical terms can follow the discussion. And yet I should admit, on the other side there are also those who can present, with a suitably generated illustration a promise of a technical future that is not really born out by the technical details of the technology that is being sold.

But illustration can be a great help to imagination, and so I take my hat off to the masters who made it so, and if you're in the neighborhood . . . . .

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