



On the Beach --  
Nowhere to flee from  
nuclear fallout

Well, for obvious reasons. But [Ann](#), citing Will Saletan, raises a good question: why are people so much more concerned about nuclear accidents than, say oil spills or other environmental disasters? If we accept Saletan's figures of "direct fatalities" being 18 times more dangerous for oil production per energy unit (and there are reasons not to - see below), then one wonders why we don't worry more about oil spills.

To me, the most obvious answer concerns risk avoidance. You don't want to die or get seriously injured on an oil derrick? Simple: don't work there. Don't want to eat food poisoned by oil slicks? Okay: avoid food from the gulf. But with nuclear accidents, there is the ever-present fear of fallout causing radiation sickness *and not being able to take steps to avoid it*. Who knows where the fallout will travel and how far? Ann suggests that it may be about not being able to *see* radiation damage, and I suppose that that's part of it, but I think it's more about not being able to get away.

For the record, I'm a little dubious about whether Saletan's statistic really tells us much: what if someone gets terrible radiation sickness and then dies 20 years earlier than before? Is that a "direct fatality"? What if the radiation causes birth defects in their children? Apparently, that doesn't count. In any event, as our commenter Jonathan Parfrey points out, now that Fukushima Unit 2's containment vessel has been breached, the statistics might change considerably.