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Headline: The Oil Spill Heard 'Round the Country!

By Miles Corwin

SANTA BARBARA - From a large crack on the bottom of the Santa Barbara Channel, about 5 miles off the coastline, a few barrels of oil bubble to the surface each day. The slick and the nearby Unocal Corp. drilling platform Alpha are the last visible vestiges of the worst oil spill in the nation's history.

Twenty years ago today, on Jan. 28, 1969, a "blowout" erupted below the platform and, before it was plugged, more than 3 million gallons of crude oil spewed from drilling-induced cracks in the channel floor. For weeks national attention was focused on the spill's disturbing, dramatic images. Oil-soaked birds, unable to fly, slowly dying on the sand. Waves so thick with crude oil that they broke on shore with an eerie silence. Thirty miles of sandy beaches coated with thick sludge. Hundreds of miles of ocean covered with an oily black sheen. But the spill's impact went far beyond the fouled beaches. The disaster is considered to be a major factor in the birth of the modern-day environmental movement.

It was the Spark, "The blowout was the spark that brought the environmental issue to the nation's attention," said Arent Schuyler, lecturer emeritus in environmental studies at UC Santa Barbara. "People could see very vividly that their communities could bear the brunt of industrial accidents. They began forming environmental groups to protect their communities and started fighting for legislation to protect the environment."

During the next few years there was more environmental legislation than at any time in the nation's history. In 1969, Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act which requires environmental impact studies before any federal action can be taken. California adopted similar legislation in 1970. A wave of national environmental legislation followed, including clean air and water acts, and laws that protected sensitive coastal areas and endangered species. The spill caused many people to doubt the safety claims of the oil industry and the government, said Michael Paparian, state director of the Sierra Club. Environmental activism gained widespread support he said and in the two years after the oil spill, Sierra club membership doubled.....