

'69 Oil Spill Leaves Mark on SB Environmentalism I

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Photographed from the air Jan. 29, 1969, oil bubbles to the ocean's surface from cracks in the sea floor around Platform A. Following the rig's blowout, upward of three million barrels of oil leaked uncontrollably for 10 days, resulting in a slick that covered 800 square miles

In a massive swirl of black and blue, three million gallons of oil surged through the ruptured sea floor of the Santa Barbara Channel, leaving an 800-square-mile bruise on the ocean's surface.

Over a 10-day period, beginning Jan. 28, 1969, a blowout of Union Oil's Platform A spilled crude oil onto beaches from Pismo to Oxnard and beyond. The resulting mess of tar killed upward of 10,000 birds, suffocated marine plant life and left large portions of Santa Barbara County smelling like a petroleum refinery.

Thirty-six years ago today, network news media began covering the story of an ecological disaster, the scale of which had not been seen in the United States since the advent of television. With images of the blowout's devastation beamed nightly into living rooms, many Americans — and subsequently their elected representatives — recognized Santa Barbara as the birthplace of a new national priority: environmental protection.

From Bad to Worse

Platform A, approximately 210 feet high, peers over the horizon about six miles off the southeastern coast of downtown Santa Barbara. On Jan. 28, 1969, at 10:45 a.m. something went terribly wrong.

According to accounts published in *Black Tide: The Santa Barbara Oil Spill and its Consequences*, a 1972 book by local environmental activist Robert Easton, workers on Platform A were removing long lengths of drill pipe from Well A-21 when the hole lost pressure.

Through a combination of factors including porous sea floor composition and shallower-than-usual protective well casings, pulling out the drill pipes caused an imbalance between the subterranean oil pressure pushing up and the weight of drilling mud used to seal the hole.

With a roar, gas and mud spewed 90 feet into the air with a pressure estimated to be between 1,100 and 1,700 pounds per square inch. After exhausting several emergency options to plug the flow of highly flammable gas, the platform's workers — drenched in mud that was raining down upon them — activated the final well closure device. Two steel rams slammed together over the well opening, sealing it shut.

However, that problem was only beginning. With the well sealed, pressure built up beneath the platform. Finding the path of least resistance, the oil oozed up through fault line cracks in the sea floor and bubbled to the water's surface —

in some places, as far as 800 feet from the platform itself.

Like it was being sucked from a straw — or siphoned from a gas tank — oil flowed freely into the Santa Barbara Channel, at varying rates, for the better part of the year.

A Community Primed

The crude oil made landfall Feb. 3, 1969, six days after the initial blowout. Tar clogged and closed Santa Barbara Harbor, while cleanup crews used straw to absorb oil that had washed up on the sand. Volunteers led an enormous effort to scrub oil-choked birds.

At the time of the spill, Marc McGinnes was a young lawyer at a large law firm in San Francisco. He said he came to Santa Barbara in April after the spill, looking to make a difference. With the help of friends, he found himself heading the January 28th Committee, helping to shape the community's outpouring of rage and passion into a potent, media-friendly ecological counter-offensive.

Today, on the brink of retirement after 30-plus years teaching environmental law in UCSB's Environmental Studies Dept., he reflects on Santa Barbara's role in the birth of the nationwide environmental movement, and his own role in seeing that movement to fruition.

During the 1960s, McGinnes said Santa Barbara residents engaged in several major campaigns aimed at defeating federal and state plans for their county that would have adversely affected the local environment and quality of life.

He said resident opposition derailed federal plans for an elevated freeway to run through the city, in addition to proposals calling for the opening of wilderness areas in the Los Padres National Forest and the "Catalina-type" commercialization of the Channel Islands.

While opposition to offshore oil drilling existed prior to the 1969 blowout, fueled in part by the refusal of oil companies and the federal government to hold public hearings to discuss their operations, McGinnes said locals were ready for a bigger fight.

"Santa Barbara was primed," McGinnes said. "We had a community that was really not used to taking shit from anybody, no matter who they were and under what authority they claimed the right to make decisions."

McGinnes said he thinks Santa Barbara's natural beauty was instrumental in attracting nationwide media coverage.

"I think the press glommed onto this because it was the destruction of a beautiful place by big oil," he said. "It was perceived by many as a case of government decision-making gone terribly wrong."

Throwing a Match on Gasoline

UCSB Political Science professor Eric RAN Smith, whose research focuses on public opinion and energy policy, said the roots of anti-oil protests in the Santa Barbara Channel date back to the installation of oil platforms off the coast of Summerland, long before the Platform A blowout.

"They started offshore oil drilling in the 1890s, and within a year or two, there were anti-oil protests, there were newspaper editorials and letters to the editor about this horrible, foul, evil, ugly stuff [happening] on the beaches and offshore," Smith said. "At that point, I think it was largely aesthetic. People saw it, it was ugly, and it was ruining what people recognized as a beautiful place."

Smith said Summerland, which had been founded as a religious retreat, had been turned into a "forest of oil rigs."

"That's the starting point," Smith said. "There were periodic protests against the oil industry throughout the century."

One of the largest anti-oil marches took place during 1968, Smith said, a year before the blowout captured national attention and galvanized the environmental movement. He said the Santa Barbara area has always attracted people who are well educated and relatively financially secure — people who have the time and resources to make their voices heard.

“It’s obviously a beautiful area, and by the 1960s, people were beginning to learn that the oil industry was dangerous,” Smith said. “So when the spill happens... it was like throwing a match on gasoline.”

On Monday, Part 2: The 1969 Santa Barbara oil blowout forces environmental protection to the top of the national agenda. In the past 36 years, what’s changed?