

# A Lasting Legacy of Offshore Drilling | The Daily Nexus

On his way to class in late January of 1969, Paul Relis was listening to the radio as he drove toward UCSB from downtown Santa Barbara.

“I heard that there was this phenomenon,” Relis said to a crowd of about 100 people at the Santa Barbara Public Library last week. “Some oil had leaked on the beach. And I remember just making this decision: ‘Do I go right to campus or left to the water?’ and that was probably the most significant decision of my life. I went left. I showed up at the Stearns Wharf area, and I just couldn’t believe the sight. There were helicopters, there were media and this awful image of the whole coastline — [it] suddenly looked dead, and for some reason, that moment changed my life.”

At a presentation in the library’s Faulkner Gallery last Thursday night, longtime Santa Barbara environmental activists commemorated the anniversary of an event that changed all of their lives — and changed the way Americans nationwide viewed environmental protection.

Thirty-six years ago, on Jan. 28, an accidental blowout at the offshore oil-drilling Platform A triggered a crude-oil spill that heavily damaged the coastline between Pismo Beach and Oxnard, coating beaches with up to three million gallons of oil.

Relis, now the president of the Community Environmental Council Board of Directors and a lecturer in the UCSB Environmental Studies Dept., said that even at the time, something about the spill told him it would be a world-changing event.

## Topping the Agenda

Near the end of one of the most turbulent decades in American history, the oil spill in the Santa Barbara Channel left a unique stain. It marked the end of widespread public trust in the oil industry, and also an end to complacency about environmental regulations.

“There had been a series of environmental laws that didn’t do much,” said Eric R.A.N. Smith, a UCSB political science professor and author of the book *Energy, the Environment and Public Opinion*. “But [there was] a growing sentiment, not just about offshore oil, but about air pollution, water pollution and other areas, and [the spill] pushed the environmental issues onto the top of the agenda for the nation. So it was right up there along with Vietnam.”

President Richard Nixon toured the spill’s devastation in Santa Barbara himself shortly after it occurred, drawing throngs of protesters demanding that he “get oil out” of the Santa Barbara Channel.

As a direct result of the spill, Smith said, Nixon eventually reorganized a number of bureaucratic agencies to form the new Environmental Protection Agency.

“This is enormously important because... you’ve got all the environmental policy people together in one organization,” he said. “They were much stronger. They had much more influence than they had when they were scattered out over a dozen different bureaus and agencies.”

When the spill was all over the newspapers, Smith said politicians responded very quickly.

Legislators enacted clean air and clean water acts in addition to the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA required the federal government to hold open hearings and allow public comment on any planned development that could potentially impact the environment. In addition, NEPA legislation introduced grounds for the public to sue to stop such development.

## The January 28th Committee

With the attention of national network media focused on images of oil-covered birds and the blackened Santa Barbara sands, Marc McGinnes said he and his friends were determined to make sure the subsequent wave of environmental activism in Santa Barbara became more than just a “flash in the pan.”

McGinnes, currently a UCSB environmental studies professor, began a career practicing environmental law after the spill, and was one of the first people to join UCSB's newly minted Environmental Studies Dept. in 1970.

"The idea was to say, 'Look, let's work toward a national environmental conference on the first anniversary of the spill that will make such a big splash that it will launch a movement,'" McGinnes said. "We're gonna bring the media back."

McGinnes became chairman of the January 28th Committee. A year to the day after the spill, the committee held its conference and attracted the media attention its organizers were banking on, including a national TV news segment anchored by Walter Cronkite.

"If it weren't for the press, Santa Barbara would not have played a major role in the environmental movement," McGinnes said.

Also at that first conference on Jan. 28, 1970, Roderick Nash, who would shortly after help start UCSB's Environmental Studies Dept., read his Santa Barbara Declaration of Environmental Rights. Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the document proposed "...a revolution in conduct toward the environment which is rising in revolt against us."

McGinnes said the document is more than a knee-jerk, "not in my back yard" response on behalf of Santa Barbarans to environmentally damaging development, pointing to a particular passage authored by Nash.

"We must find the courage to take upon ourselves as individuals responsibility for the welfare of the whole environment," McGinnes read, "treating our own back yards as if they were the world and the world as if it were our back yard."

### **What's Changed?**

Platform A still breaks the horizon when looking south from downtown Santa Barbara. Oil production continues in the channel, unmolested by protesters. The pro-environment galvanization sparked locally and nationally after the '69 spill still holds strong — it's just no longer as visible.

"In the context of the '60s, the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement... there were a huge number of people who were amazingly fired up trying to do something to protect us against oil, polluted air [and] dirty water," Smith said. "To a large extent it's just sort of spread out. A lot of those beliefs have been accepted and become very widespread."

Smith said environmentalists have won many battles in the past three decades, including fights for higher air quality standards and stiffer regulations governing offshore oil drilling.

"There is a lot of oil out here, and they're still drilling it, but there is certainly less drilling than there would have been if not for the accident locally," Smith said.

However, Linda Krop, chief counsel for the Santa Barbara-based Environmental Defense Center (EDC), said she thinks the environment has not been in more danger since the spill than during the current Bush administration.

Where activists gained new tools after the oil spill, like NEPA, Krop said the Bush administration tries to get around the laws.

"We keep fighting the same battles," Krop said. "Even when we win lawsuits, Bush's response is that he wants to change the law."

Krop said the EDC is still fighting to keep 36 undeveloped offshore oil leases undeveloped, despite Bush administration goals to double oil production off the California coast.

"I'm not always so negative; we've saved a lot of open spaces," Krop said. "But when it comes to offshore oil, we're constantly putting our finger in the dike."

### **Environmentalism 36 Years Later**

Smith said environmental issues are becoming more difficult for the public to see and understand.

“You can look out and see an oil spill. You used to be able to look out at Los Angeles and not see the city because of the smog,” Smith said. “It’s much cleaner than it used to be. It’s hard to look out and see global warming or coral reef deterioration... It’s harder to get people excited...”

Smith said public opinion data also shows that although a large number of people identify themselves as environmentalists, the percentage has slipped from around 70 percent in the 1980s to around 50 percent as of five years ago.

McGinnes said that despite the overall strength of the UCSB environmental studies program, enrollment numbers in the department — which is celebrating its 35th anniversary this spring — are down from their peak.

“[The environment] has become not such a front-burner issue with many people,” McGinnes said. “There hasn’t been another big thing, so global studies has taken our place, I think, on this campus in terms of a major that attracts young, idealistic people.”

McGinnes said he thinks college students, in a big change from the 1960s, are now more wrapped up in a consumer culture that has them paying less attention to their place in the environment.

“To me, that’s what’s changed a lot,” he said. “People think of themselves as consumers, rather than as citizens, and there’s an apathy that goes along with that.”