



**Transcript of Video Interview with Josh Ashenmiller  
Ph.D, Professor of History, Fullerton College, Fullerton CA, recorded May 2010.**

This interview is part of Earth Alert's Heroes of the Coast video archive, featuring interviews with leading California coastal activists, past and present California Coastal Commissioners and Coastal Commission staff. For more information, visit [www.earthalert.org](http://www.earthalert.org).

(This interview was recorded as footage for the *Stories of the Spill* documentary. Questions from interviewer are not audible.)

Well, certainly the 1969 oil spill transformed local politics, probably the most at first. It changed Santa Barbara from being a town that was mostly wealthy and fairly conservative in its political outlook to taking a pretty radical look at the way decisions were made at the local level, the state level and the federal level.

It changed state politics because the State Land Commission took a more active role in regulating the leasing and drilling for oil on the outer continental shelf.

And it had an effect even on federal policy. About one year after the spill happened, President Richard Nixon signed the National Environmental Policy Act in 1970 and in that same year, also signed the act that created the Environmental Protection Agency. And it wasn't all due to the oil spill, but the oil spill was a major factor in those changes.

[interviewee is asked questions that were quite similar, or to repeat a thought more concisely, to elicit different, though similar responses, toward the goal of effective use in the documentary.]

The '69 spill certainly changed bureaucracy at the state level and the federal level. At the federal level, the Department of the Interior was frankly ashamed of what happened. In fact, Interior Secretary Stewart Udall came to Santa Barbara a year after the spill for a conference that devised there by environmentalists and basically apologized for the lease sale that resulted in the oil rigs, so it totally changed the culture of the Interior Department.

The state became much more active through the State Lands Commission and locally, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors became completely hostile to the oil industry. One of the executives at Union Oil complained a few years later that OPEC was easier to deal with than the Santa Barbara Board of Supervisors. So I think it changed all three levels.

Unfortunately, I think environmental legislation tends to float down the list of priorities when economic concerns rise up the list of priorities. As we've seen in the last couple of years with the economic recession, environmental protection consistently in the opinion polls and consistently in what legislators do takes a back seat to problems like unemployment, national security, the price of oil, the price of gasoline. There's no better evidence of that, I think, than the fact that when you drive by the Santa Barbara Channel today, there are still dozens of oil rigs out there

pumping oil. And there's even been a recent call to increase the amount of oil they're producing to try to bring down the price of oil.

I think the BP oil spill will have a definite impact on current discussions about energy security. And President Obama, just a few weeks before the BP oil spill, announced that he was going to increase the amount of oil drilling on federal offshore leases, not just in California, but in the Gulf and off the East Coast. So he quickly backtracked on that as soon as the BP oil spill started last April, so it's definitely having a dampening effect on the search for new oil on U.S.-controlled land. There's no question about that.

How will the love affair between Americans and hydrocarbons end? Well, as I've always tried to say, I don't see it as much of a love affair, because a love affair to me implies reciprocity and your car will never love you no matter how much you love your car. To me, it's much more of an infatuation or a fetish.

But there's never going to be a day when the last drop of oil is mined out of the Earth, because long before that day happens, it will be so expensive that companies won't see it as profitable to keep pumping oil out of the Earth. So it's going to end because of high prices, not because of scarcity really. Those are two sides of the same coin, but they are a little different. And as a historian, I hate to make predictions. So I'm not going to say, "50 years... 100 years." I do say that I'm very ambivalent. When I see the price of gas go up, I'm secretly dismayed because I have to drive a lot, but also thrilled because I think maybe this is going to increase demand for public transport, hybrid cars, electric vehicles, train travel. So I think we're going to get there through the price mechanism.

Do I predict that the U.S. will ever achieve energy independence? I think it will eventually, because the age of hydrocarbon will come to an end at some point. I'm not willing to predict whether it will take the next 50 years, or the next 100 years, but at some point people are still going to demand automobility, people are still going to demand heated houses and hot water heaters, and the U.S. will just have to figure out some way to do it without having to mine the energy out of the Earth.

My advice to high school students for protecting the environment would be to think hard about where you live, and I don't just mean where in the world you live, or what city you live in, but where your local location is going to be. Are you going to be close to where you work? Are you going to be close to the places you travel to and from on a daily basis? Your transport decisions, I think, have the biggest effect on shrinking your carbon footprint.

If the President called me and asked for environmental advice, I would advise him to invest heavily in high speed rail. I think most of the carbon burning in this country happens with people taking plane flights and long car trips when they would just as soon take a high speed rail trip instead.

Nixon was able to sign so many important pieces of legislation in part because he was a rival of some members of Congress who were going to run for President, or were planning on making a Presidential run in 1972. The best example is actually Ed Muskie, the senator from Maine, who

was most responsible for pushing through the water pollution control amendments of 1972, which also have Nixon's signature on them. Nixon wanted to be ahead of Muskie on this issue, and Muskie wanted to be ahead of Nixon. So it wasn't really a spirit of bipartisan cooperation. It was really rivalry, which probably explains just about everything that Nixon did anyway, so it's consistent with the view of Nixon as being very partisan first and environmentalist purely by accident.

His signature is on the National Environmental Policy Act, which is today the most important federal law on how federal agencies have to protect the environment. His signature is also on the act that created the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. His signature is on the Clean Air Act amendment of 1970, the federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972, the Endangered Species Act of 1973. These acts together are probably the most litigated environmental law in U.S. history.

The next big environmental battle to be fought will be over the scarcity of drinking water, of water supplies, not just in the United States, especially in the arid West, but throughout the world. Arid regions of the world are experiencing the fastest population growth and are running into serious scarcity issues. And it's going to be expensive to desalinate water. It's going to be expensive to mine deeper for the water that's available.

I think looking at it historically, there's no reason why the United States can't catch up with other countries when it comes to solar energy. The United States had to play catch up on railroads. The United States had to play catch up in the industrial revolution, in the chemical manufacturing revolution around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. And with all those cases, they started in other places. But what gave the United States an advantage was usually a very concerted effort at government investment, investing in the research, investing in the infrastructure. There's no reason that can't happen again.

I wasn't paying attention to the details of it, but I have to say it's one of the consequences, I think, the environmental movement has paid when you embark on a strategy of using the law and creating something like the EDC (Environmental Defense Center). EDC is a staff of lawyers. They think in terms of what is possible under the law, and sometimes what is possible is a swap or a compromise, which is basically what they had to make in that recent controversy. So it's entirely consistent with the way the EDC has operated. In the past, they've been a little more confrontational and now it seems that they have some people on the other side of the table they can bargain with, but I don't think anybody should be surprised at the outcome. It didn't surprise me. But I was a little surprised at the vociferousness of the criticism that was launched at EDC. Criticize the industry, but don't criticize the lawyers that you basically deputized to go negotiate with them.

[end of interview]