



Transcript of Video Interview with James Chen, 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.

This interview with profession photographer James Chen was recorded for the *Stories of the Spill* documentary.

James Chen: James Chen: Gurgling up you know, blobs of it, crashing in that very thick way on to the shore, that was very dramatic.

Janet Bridgers: As a professional photographer part of what you're expecting is to be perfectly neutral about in a journalistic sense about what you were doing, but I imagine it was hard to do. How were these scenes affecting you emotionally or were they not affecting you emotionally?

James Chen: Well, it was affecting me emotionally it, uh, it's, you just have to go along with what's going on but in your mind you're thinking wow, I've never seen this before, I've never seen this large of an operation before, wow, how are they gonna clean that area with just siphons?

James Chen: Uh, they had these trucks, I guess they were water trucks or tankers with uh, hoses that sucked up oil. And men would be out right by the marina over the side with the uh, with the uh, hoses in the water trying to clean it up, and it was just, it felt like it was just a little toothpick, trying to pick up all that oil in this vast area, so that was a thought.

James Chen: Wondering, are they really going to clean it up? Is it really going to be gone?

Janet Bridgers: Did you have any sense of the motivation, and maybe the that's a negative, I don't mean to, what motivated Union to hire all these photographers to take pictures?

James Chen: That was a very vague situation. We never got to meet anybody I think they all were representatives, arm's length away from the Union Oil people. We were never really given any specifics to photograph, it was just, go cover this event, this oil spill.

James Chen: Whatever you see. Just shoot it. And we needed to develop, we needed to deliver undeveloped film to them at the end of the day. It got monotonous after the first three or four days because of the activities were fairly similar. We would all try and find areas that had crews of individuals saving wildlife, that tugged at us and we felt that it was something that would be more interesting to see than a vast scenic shot of just this oil and industrial equipment out on the beach. So we were not really directed by them at all.

James Chen: It was just whatever we got.

Janet Bridgers: Since 1969 I'm sure that you've had opportunities to shoot all kind of situations,

what since 1969 would you say is, that you've photographed that's of a comparable scale?

James Chen: Well, nothing. I, I don't specialize in events such as these disasters, I'm not a photo-journalist per se, I'm a commercial photographer. In most commercial photography you're trying to make things look very beautiful. To a point where it's almost unreal.

James Chen: So my contrast, the contrast in what I did for the coverage of the oil spill and what I did later, really were black and white in that sense. And I've learned to respect journalists a lot more, because it's not easy to capture something that isn't staged.

James Chen: As it unfolds and to get something that's usable, as journalist I think is quite a challenge. For us, for our commercial work we have large crews setting up things sweeping up the foreground rotating the tires so they're all even. Making sure that the hair isn't flying, make up is on, etc., so it's, it's just the opposite of what I did at the uh, covering the oil.

Janet Bridgers: How would you say that that event either personally, or as part of humanity, you know, and you can answer either way, how would you say it's affected your life or our lives?

James Chen: Well, it's affected my life in that I realize that it, it's not enough to accept bad air somewhere, or seeing a polluted ocean, that we needed to speak up, because in reality if you don't, those things will eventually disappear, the quality of life will disappear. It's made me more vocal when I'm traveling, if I see that it's obvious obviously wrong to be dumping raw sewage in the ocean, uh, I've had moments where I would find somebody and at least bring that up.

James Chen: And most of the time it's just a shrug and a "What can ya do?" But it never felt right, so those are things that I've learned, that you can't take it for granted. You can't take clean air, clean oceans, all that, as something that we'll have forever, unless we step up and let them know that it's important.

Janet Bridgers: If you were addressing a group of high school students, and you could ask each of them to do one favor in terms of protecting the environment or more specifically the California coast, what favor would you ask of them?

James Chen: Well, the favor I would ask of the students to be involved, would be to make sure that you speak up when you see something that is not right. And to understand what is natural and what isn't natural. If it's natural we may not be able to correct it, but if it's correctable, man made, or something that affects us directly from what we do, we need to keep vigilant over who we enroll to think along with our thoughts.

James Chen: In terms of making sure that things are clean, things are the way it is, because of if we don't do that, generationally it could evade us. It would go away, so we need to stick with it. We know that now I see that a lot of the city drainage have little signs that say, "Drains to the Ocean Do Not Dump", etc.

James Chen: Well, when we were in town earlier, none of those things were really made aware to us, so that's one area that I see from when I was here early to now, I see those signs now, I see

little grates in front of drainages off the streets, and signs that say, "Do Not Dump," goes straight to the ocean. Those kinds of little things are adding up to make us more aware of how we can be part of keeping things cleaner, which eventually affects all of us, in our health and in our well being.

Janet Bridgers: In your opinion what would you say is today's most ominous threat to the California coastline?

James Chen: I don't know if there's only one situation or one event that might be ominous but the commercial shipping is a definite area that we need to be aware of, they are far away out there and we don't see visually the damage or the effects that they're causing. But we need to make sure that the regulations are there and that enforcement can be effective enough to make sure that they are maintaining, or they're leaving the ocean that they're sailing through in the same clean condition as they leave us.

James Chen: They can't be, you know, they can't be purging anything, they can't be cleaning their tanks out there. Those are all things that are not visible to us, but we need to make sure that everyone understands that it's important to protect. So I would think that the commercial shipping out there in our channel is a very important thing to keep track of, to make sure that nothing goes awry.

Janet Bridgers: If you were to receive a call from President Obama and President Obama said that, "I'm going to grant to you one favor in relation to the protection of the California coastline, what favor would you ask him to give?"

James Chen: I, I would be a little facetious on this one because as I, I would have to ask him to grant it to someone else who was more capable, who's more trained in it, who has gone through the proper education to understand. All I can do really is to be aware that if you toss your cigarette butt there it's not good. And I may at this stage be brazen enough to tell 'em, "Please, don't do that."

James Chen: But in order for me to advise anybody, like that, I would defer to someone else.

Janet Bridgers: So, one last question. What would you say is the next great environmental battle that we're going to find ourselves fighting?

James Chen: Well, all, anything great, a big bad event would be caused by small things that are occurring today, so if we were to maintain with good guidance from organizations such as our local community environmental council, we should be aware of all the little areas that we need to deal with, conserving water, making sure that the air is clean, the ocean is clean, and that sound, noise, all of those little things that may not be important while you're struggling to survive, but if you take a step back and really feel what is the quality of life I think all of those items, all those little things add up.

James Chen: To possibly prevent a major that might happen later on in life later on in our history so we need to be better stewards of what we have and how to use it minimally and to be able to

enjoy for the long haul.

Janet Bridgers: So, what is it, what questions did I not ask that I might have missed that you would be interested in answering?

James Chen: I think you've covered it. And, thank you.

Janet Bridgers: Well, and thank you very much. We really appreciate you taking the time.

James Chen: Well, thanks.

Janet Bridgers: Your insight is unique from a photographer's perspective. It's really kind of interesting to see and hear how you....

[end of tape]

