



Transcript of Video Interview with Mary Distin, 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 Mary Distin was recorded as part of the work to create the *Stories of the Spill* documentary.

Janet Bridgers (JB): ...a record for the front of the footage, what's your name, and your occupation and your affiliation that's relevant with any organizations.

MD: My name is Mary Distin. And I work in the medical field now and I'm not affiliated in any way anymore with anything in the oil and gas, but I am an environmentalist and an animal rescuer, too.

JB: In 1969, tell us how old you were and what you were doing then.

MD: In 1969, I was 19 and I was living at the beach in Ventura at the time of the oil spill and the flood which also happened simultaneously.

JB: There was a progression of events. If you would start at the beginning of the series of events.

MD: It started out...it was winter and it was raining a lot. So there was this huge, massive rain, for weeks on end. Huge, unbelievable, catastrophic event where all the rocks and boulders and everything started flowing down from Ojai and Santa Paula, everything heading as a tsunami, from the opposite direction toward the ocean...thousands of head of cattle, thousands of orange trees, avocado trees, bodies, cars, houses, all heading toward the ocean. It did eventually reach the ocean, and in fact, taking out part of Hwy. 101. When it went out there, the storms, of course, and the ocean were really churning everything up. It came out and took out a tertiary plant, which was close by in Ventura, and Mandalay Bay Generating Station, which is right there at Oxnard, by McGrath State Beach, and also the Ventura Marina, which it sent everything in, and everything got sucked out, took all the boats and ships, destroyed everything into matchsticks and then it just washed everything onshore, all to the beaches all along Ventura and Oxnard. The marinas were just decimated. And it was so massive. It was higher than two- or three- story buildings. It was huge.

And of course, then, what else could go wrong? The oil platform blew up and then everything came in from all over the beaches. And they always hear about Santa Barbara, but no one ever thinks much about what happened downstream, and living in Ventura, we were just south of Santa Barbara, and down it came. And it was unbelievable. It was just massive amounts of oil that came in and covered up...you have to remember our beaches, at that time, were about as tall as a two- or three-story building in some areas of ships, cars, animals, trees, everything you could think of, boulders and then the oil came and covered everything up on top of all that. And then we had dead seals, and we had whales. We had sea birds. It was unbelievable. And it was...so the beaches were condemned for two years. No one could walk on it, and here you are

living there. It's your backyard and you can't even walk down there, because... And it was massive. And it took about... It took a good two years, at least, because I remember that the Navy, which is really close here in Oxnard, came through with scrapers, and they had aircraft and helicopters and all that stuff. But the Navy came through with scrapers and it took about two years to clean all this debris up. And here it is, 2011, and you can still walk on the beach and you still get oil all over your clothes. It's still there, not to the extent, but it's still there.

JB: The first part of what you described was an act of God, essentially weather-related. But the second part was a manmade event. Can you describe your emotions related to the oil spill, how you felt about it?

MD: You know, it was heart-wrenching. You know, really, if you think about it, because here is this clean, pristine place that you played in every day. You went surfing or paddling or whatever. It was gorgeous. And then, all of a sudden, everything you had was just covered in oil. But you can get past the debris field. You could get past the rocks and the boulders and that was an act of God and it can happen. But when you saw the oil all over everything and you saw the animals dying, and the seabirds, you can't describe that in your mind. It's just too much. It was horrible to watch, horrible to watch these animals dying.

JB: Tell us about the cleanup. Did you have any role in the cleanup or was it just what you did in your backyard? Tell us how it played out for you.

MD: You know, back then it wasn't as it is now. You didn't see people getting involved in stuff like that. We were not allowed on the beach. Everything was roped off. Nobody was allowed down there anymore. It was just the military. It was just the government. Nobody could walk down there. Nobody could set foot on it. The police would patrol. You could get ticketed. So you didn't have people being allowed... at least as I saw down there in those days. There might have been other areas, and maybe people with a more professional background might have been allowed, but as you see now with Heal the Beach, and people who go out and clean and work on projects, I don't remember ever seeing that in those days. They could have been there, but I never saw. All I remember is saying, "if you walk on that beach, we'll arrest you." And that's what they told us.

JB: Did... over... as the time started to stretch out, did you become involved in the environmental organizations that began at that time?

MD: Things started changing very rapidly, at least for me, during that timeframe, and that's when you started seeing more and more people being involved in healing the ocean, stopping the oil platforms that were just going up all over here in the Channel Islands and I didn't get really involved in a lot of that stuff yet, but I was very involved in the anti-oil movement because after having lived through that and watched what happened to all the animals, and the sand, and the housing, you know... it was very uncool. You started waking up real quick after that. And you started saying, first off, "why couldn't we go down the beach?" I knew it was a health hazard, but why couldn't we help clean it up. "What are you guys hiding?" And then, of course, years later, you find out what they were hiding.

JB: Do you remember the Prop 20 campaign in 1972, the statewide initiative that created the Coastal Act? Does that ring a bell as a political event?

MD: I don't remember that.

JB: Okay. How, as concisely as you can say it, how would you say the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill affected your life?

MD: Well, the first thing that I thought of is "we have to start getting out of this situation of just relying on just oil. Because look what can happen very quickly and look at the disaster that can happen very quickly. So there's so many other alternatives. There's solar, there's wind power and there's hydro. And I thought it was about time they stopped tearing up the ocean, tearing up the beaches and stopping the greed along that area, and that's when I think I became most involved in wanting to get away from all that. And it's so dirty out there. I've been out there. It's filthy around those things. But just wanting to be more involved in just a more natural environment, a cleaner environment. And I do like to talk to a lot of people, but to be honest with you, I'm not involved in a lot of projects like that, but I'm very aware of it, and so I live my life that way.

JB: In your opinion, what's the most ominous threat to the California coast today?

MD: Overbuilding. People are just overbuilding, they're not protecting. They're not given enough sea walls. I think they're not given enough berm because the ocean is rising and that kind of worries me. And just people who trash the beaches, overbuilding, and some of the stuff they're doing out in the ocean as far as some of the oil companies. There's a lot out there that's well hidden, that people don't know about. And that's going to have an environmental impact as far as warming the oceans. There's a lot of people that are polluting and the ships that go by, out here in the ocean, with their sonar and the Navy with their sonar, that's not very cool. With the whales, they've had a lot of problems with that and stuff. And I think people just need to be more aware we're not the only ones here and everything is a trickle-down effect, and if you don't take care of things, it will come back to haunt you later.

JB: Imagine you're speaking to a gymnasium full of high-school students and what would you tell them are the most important things they can do to protect the California coast.

MD: Well, they could stop littering for one. Take your trash home. Recycle as much as you can. If you take something in, take it back out with you. It doesn't hurt to help on the weekends when we have these cleanups along the shore. We're all people. We all belong to the same community and it helps to help keep it clean. And be careful of over-building and just keeping the ocean clean, and not putting pollution in. People throw stuff in the water so much. You know, it's pretty pathetic to watch. That's where I would start anyway. We are what we eat. We are how we clean. We are how we take care of everything.

JB: Imagine that Jerry Brown called you up on Monday and said he wanted you to be on a blue-ribbon panel to make suggestions as to how the ocean, the coast, could be protected. What would be your top one or two recommendations?

MD: Well, I think again I get back to the overbuilding, overfishing. I'm not in favor of all the oilwork that's going on out here in the Channel, the Santa Barbara Channel. Pollution from ships along the shoreline, those things I think would be at the top of my list as far the shore.

JB: You have, in your past experience, worked with companies that contracted with the major oil companies. Tell us what you learned about the blowout from your work experience.

MD: Well, in 1979 and 1980, I was working for a company in Oxnard and we had a lot of men we hired that were from Sonoco, Philips Petroleum, Union Oil and Exxon. And we worked together building platforms and specifically, we also did other welding things. And one thing I was so shocked to learn one day was one of the older gentleman's, not that they were happy about it, because the older guys tended to be more careful about how they built things and less concerned about the profit margin, but more concerned with safety. But the oil companies weren't real happy with that. So they started hiring more and more younger engineers—petroleum engineers and structural engineers—to build these platforms.

And I was kind of surprised and shocked to find out that's what happened with Union Oil and also part of Platform Houchin, was they decided to save a lot of money, so what they did is they put the wellheads down a lot shallower to save themselves millions of dollars, thinking that under perfect circumstances, it probably would work fine. It probably wouldn't have too many problems, but we don't live in a perfect world.

And these guys fought against this, and they fought against it and they said they didn't care. They wanted to save money. That was the bottom line and they did. They saved millions of dollars on the original building of these platforms. However, as you said, with Mother Nature, Mother Nature comes along. We have these huge storms and we do have them every few years. It tore up the oceans. And the well couldn't take it and it was just too much pressure for it. And because it wasn't built correctly, and it wasn't sunk down deep enough into the ocean, it shook itself up off its mooring and it started exploding oil and that was done simply because of greed. And I was just like this, and they said, "Yup." We said, "we warned 'em, we warned 'em." And they didn't care. It was some young engineer that they hired and he said, "I'll save you lots of money." And he said, "we warned 'em and exactly what we said happened happened."

JB: Okay, we're going to switch off.

Toby Younis (TY): (Hold your position. I'm going to make a couple of changes.)

JB: You lived on the beach throughout that time of the cleanup.

MD: Yeah. Yup. 1136 Cornwall Lane in Ventura. In fact, I found out Peter Strauss bought my old house. It stunk. It stunk. It smelled rot, dead animals. Oh the smell was...

JB: (Oh, beautiful shot. The blue and the peach looks really great.) [some minutes pass while logical activities take place on the set.]

JB: You said you work in medical...

MD: I work in medical. I worked in engineering and oil and gas for like 26 years, and I just switched several years ago, because you're always... I had 40 moves in 26 years. Can't really have a relationship or anything like that and I have pets.

JB: 40 moves?

MD: 40 moves in 26 years. I worked for Bechtel, Fluor. I worked in the Trade Center.

TY: Big companies.

MD: But I also worked for small guys, too. Truss Joist and construction and engineering and then I finally got tired of it and I went to headhunter in Westlake and I said, "can you find something for me to do where I'm not getting transferred all the time?" And she said, "yeah, how about medicine?" So I'm a bean counter. I'm a manager.

I got choked up, that thing about the animals. I'm such an animal rights activist.

TY: It's okay. We like emotion. Look over where Janet was.

TY: Okay, Mary, we're going to move along at a little different pace, but they're effectively the same questions.

TY: Mary, what's your name and your occupation?

MD: Mary Distin, and I work in the medical field in Ojai.

TY: Thinking back to 1969, how old were you and what was your occupation then?

MD: Nineteen and a college student.

TY: Where were you and what were you doing the first time you heard about the Santa Barbara oil spill?

MD: Well, I was living through it. I was home. I was going to school. I was living through the whole thing.

TY: I want you to go back and remember exactly where you were when you first heard about it.

MD: It was probably the evening news, looking back on it, hearing about the oil platform blowing up and just... I seem to think it was the evening news.

TY: And in the nature of curiosity, we always want to go see what's happening. Do you remember going down to the beach, and if you do remember going down to the beach, or wherever you went to see it, can you describe what you were feeling when you first saw the results of the spill?

MD: It was a mind-blower. There's just no other way to put it. It was a mind-blower. Television does not do any justice to it. First off, the stench is overwhelming. I don't think people talk about the smell that much, but you had the smell of death very strongly, from everything around you, because there's not just sea animals and whales and birds and seals and porpoises. They're all just dying. That alone, but then you have the smell of it and oil has a smell like, I don't know, I can't describe it. But when you mix that with dying animals and dying debris, living trees and stuff, it's overwhelming. It gags you.

TY: In the days after the spill, for the first several days, maybe up to a month, how did you respond to it?

MD: Well, the first thing you do is your curiosity gets the best of you, so you're always running down there to look at it, and I lived right there, on the beach. Then you want to get involved, you want to get involved cleaning up. You start getting friends and neighbors, because you want to get everybody saved as quickly as possible and clean up the ocean as quickly as possible, but they wouldn't let us. Nobody could be allowed to do that. It was only a government cleanup project. It was hush-hush. Nobody could be on the beach. Everything was roped off. They arrested you if you set foot on the sand.

TY: And what kinds of things did you see them doing when they were cleaning up?

MD: I didn't see them cleaning anything. All I saw was huge scrapers that I heard came from the Navy, but I'm not positive where they came from and just taking big back hoes and just shoving and putting everything in big containers and hauling it away.

TY: If you've ever been an activist when it comes to the California coast or other environmental issues, what kind of activism were you involved in?

MD: Well, I always have been involved in anything that had to do with keeping the oceans clean and the safety of marine life. Those were always my major things as far as the ocean goes. I think picking up debris, making sure other people pick up debris, making sure people don't put stuff in the ocean, you know, throwing things off their boats, sonar with the animals, that kind of stuff, those kind of things have always been very important to me.

TY: You mentioned that you were an animal rights activist or an animal protection activist. Can you describe what it was like to see and feel what was happening to the animals as a result of the spill?

MD: I can, but (holding back tears)...

TY: It's alright.

MD: Well, you know it's really difficult when you're looking at something and there's nothing you can do. And they're just dying, because they can't breathe anymore, because they're just

covered in oil and they're looking at you with their eyes. It's just too hard to bear really. It's overwhelming. It's just very overwhelming.

It's one thing to see like an inanimate object, like a tree or something like that, but when you're looking at a seal that dying in front of you, and even whales that actually weren't even dead yet. They were there on the ocean and they were just on the beach, just covered with stuff. And birds...I mean, it's horrible. There's just no other way to put it. It's just horrible.

TY: Let's take a break

(Mary's husband speaking in the background): It was affecting Ventura especially because they rebuilt the marina and people were still really nervous about investing in anything around the marina because ...

MD: And the tertiary plant over there, yup.

TY: Mary, how would you say that the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill affected the remainder of your life?

MD: It was a wake up call, to not sit back and be so complacent anymore. As far as just watching things go by, things being built out here, and just ignoring it. Everything has a consequence downstream. Everything has a consequence. Everything you do has something that happens later on. If you're not going to take care of what you're doing, if you're not going to build it correctly, don't build it at all, because it's going to affect everything around you—human beings, as well as animals, as well as the ocean, as well as the air we breathe. Everything has a consequence.

TY: In your opinion, what is the most ominous, the single most ominous threat to the California coastline today?

MD: What I am seeing that really gets me lately is people are trying to take some of the most beautiful parts of our coastline that we have, by Hearst Castle and Monterrey and Morro Bay and some of these places and just make another Southern California out of them. They're just trying to build and build and build. And it's not just enough to keep the oceans clean and work on that, but we need to keep our shore. That's what makes California beautiful is the surroundings, the ocean, the trees, the beaches, the landscaping and we don't need to be building golf courses and condominiums in those areas. And that worries me, because that was something that Schwarzenegger wanted to do a lot of was trying to sell a lot of those properties. I understand the state needs money, but I think there's other ways of doing it besides destroying the beauty that we have out here.

TY: I want you to imagine you're standing in front of a gymnasium full of high school seniors, the majority of whom are headed off to college and then to the rest of their lives and you get the opportunity to tell them one really big important thing that they can do to help protect the California coastline, what would you tell them?

MD: I'd tell them to be gentle with the earth. I know it's an old cliché from the 60s, but it's very truthful. It still has a lot of meaning to it to be clean, to take care of the things around you, to take care of the land around you, the water around you, the air around you. Those will all have a big impact on what happens to you down the line.

TY: Let's say you were sitting at home and the telephone rang and it was one of President Obama's associates and he said, "the President wants to talk to you." The President got on the phone. He said, "I'm going to grant you one favor in regard to the protection of the California coastline." And whatever you asked him, he was going to take care of. What would you ask him to do to protect the California coastline?

MD: Just one?

TY: Just one. The most important one.

MD: I'd have to say I'm strongly against offshore oil drilling. I think that probably has one of the worst detriments in terms of the water and the soil goes and the animals go. Unless there comes a day that someone can prove to me and show or challenge the oil companies that they can build something and build it well and build it safe, it will cost them an awful lot of money with a lower profit margin, they don't need to be doing that. The oil that we have out here in the Channel Islands isn't that good of oil anyways. It's basically a worthless garbage oil. It's really not worth drilling it. So I would say, "Number one, stop the drilling."

[end of interview]