



Transcript of Video Interview with Charles Eckberg recorded 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 was recorded for the *Stories of the Spill* documentary.

JB: So for the beginning of the tape, please tell us your name and your affiliation with organizations.

CE: I'm Charlie Eckberg and currently I'm involved with Get Oil Out. It's my 27th year on their board of directors. I'm also on the dean's council at the Bren School of Environmental Science and Management at UCSB, where primarily I try to create the context of a bridge back to the Santa Barbara Community and work with the students on a regular basis. I've been involved with the Community Environmental Council and just very active in environmental issues in our community.

JB: Tell us...going back to 1969, how old were you? What were you doing at the time?

CE: I was 20. In 1969, when the oilspill took place in Santa Barbara, I was a 20-year-old student at UCSB. I actually was living right on the beach. My apartment, my room, and so as the black waves came into the Isla Vista area, I had the first-hand experience of living, breathing, watching and experiencing what was the devastation on a regular basis. As you're probably aware, the oil would move around and it was a long event, went on for well over a year, with the releases taking place, blowing out again, and so the oil would some days be gone, and then it would come back and you'd wake up and you'd smell it again, or you'd realize you weren't hearing the waves, because now the oil was so thick on the waves, they just deaden the sound. And these were the things that were really just engrained in my experience, that and the dead and dying animals.

JB: Do you remember where you were when you first heard about it or you first became aware, how you first became aware at that first moment?

CE: You know, 41 years later, I don't know where I was, but I believe it was more than likely that I was hearing about the event, which was directly off of Santa Barbara, and I'm out at UCSB, which is some distance, 10 miles or more, and I really think that it was when the oil started coming ashore where I was that I was really obviously drawn into the situation. That's my best recollection as to how it came. It was in my face. And it wasn't something you were going to avoid or turn a blind eye to. It was all over the beach.

JB: How did you feel?

CE: I felt sick. And it really was a combination. The air was foul. You were seeing these things, but also something that had not been experienced. To my understanding, this was the first time that there had been such an event and it happened in the United States, and now it was happening

in our community. And it was beyond understanding. And it was really black gunk. It was an oil that...it was oppressive. And then the death that was associated with it, because we were seeing, as you go down the birds, and they would be tarred and they would be struggling and they would die, and even when you tried to take them to the receiving centers, you knew that this was very small chance that there was going to be any survival and that was the reality. The techniques were just brand new. How do you deal with something like this? People didn't know. And so everything that they tried in my mind seemed to be just a failure. It was a stopgap. It was a wish or hope and a prayer and we didn't have much success. And so this is part of it that people don't understand. It wasn't like a beginning and an end to this oil blowout. There were periodically these news releases that they plugged the spill, and then it would break loose again. And you would go through it again. And the oil would move around and be out to the islands, and up to Pismo Beach. It'd be down south, and then that spill would come toward Isla Vista, and it wasn't like we'd had satellite imagery. You weren't following this other than certainly what with the aircraft and such, but it was a story that galvanized the community. And as a young person, it certainly was a different experience, because now in the classes were talking about it and there were some really wonderful educators, and I think it was my opportunity...I was in Rod Nash's class at the time, so I was getting a lot of that perspective from him firsthand as a student, and it was part of what you just layered on, it became part of my culture.

Toby: ...represent, how were they part of the coastal protection thought, how are they all part of it, what is that they do that they can claim the title "protectors of the coast."

CE: Get Oil Out or GOO has as its main mission to protect the coast and obviously we are focused on gas and oil issues. We have had a context of being an educational arm, and so we make the opportunity to remind people of the 1969 event. We also try to put these things in a context to the issues that have happened since then...the Exxon Valdez, the Gulf. We will sponsor or participate in these discussions with other groups in Santa Barbara, so that one of the things that we have that is such an important aspect is that there is a collegial feeling about supporting each other, supporting the group, supporting the missions, because we all come back to the same point regarding the coast and the desire to protect it, whether it be from inappropriate development, whether it be from the gas and oil industry, whether it just be that there are schemes out there that will take away the enjoyment that the community has for this precious aspect of the environment.

One of the things that I really appreciate is that the University, being the prominent campus that it is, with a worldwide status, with a national recognition, has a lot of things happening where students are still being taught and being given access to activism. And so whenever we are asked to participate, Get Oil Out, in any of the student events, we relish that opportunity. And now, myself, as an elder, and having been involved at the University when that spill took place, I am able to speak in terms, first hnd, of what it was like, and why it's important that the young people today have a consciousness that comes from a place to protect the environment, because in the long run, there's not much else that we'll be able to count on. And it's well received. So we stay active, as an organization, and yet we are a board that is all volunteer. We do not have a staff. We do not maintain an office, but we have decided that the place that we have in today's world, we have worked to be an organization that is there to function, and still pursue the mission that is 40+ years old. It's just we do it a little differently than some might expect.

Toby: How would you say, if you were asked, did the 1969 Santa Barbara blowout affect the rest of your life.

CE: The blowout in 1969 is a pivotal event in my life. At the time, I certainly didn't understand how the path was going to manifest. I was engaged with what was the witnessing the impact mainly to birds and the marine mammals, the life consequences. But within eight years, I was at a position of responsibility where I was going up against the gas and oil companies. This was the scheme to develop liquefied natural gas at Pt. Conception and I was, at that time, as a 30-year-old, I became the manager of the Holister Ranch—15,000 acres adjacent to what was this proposed facility. And I fought it with every fiber that I could and it was something that when I would become tired and overwhelmed, I'd remember the oil spill, the oil blowout, and those consequences and recognize that LNG was capable of much the same or worse. It wouldn't be oil, but it would be a highly explosive situation. It would be degradation of the land. It would be change in what was a coastline to benefit those that were going to make money off of this. It was my opportunity many, many years later to be involved in acquiring that land away from the utility companies and actually taking steps that I believe will preserve it for all kind, taking it out of the ownership that was intent on making a use of it for economic gain related to gas and oil to really seeing it in the hands of individuals who cared about the land and will preserve it. And so there's a thousand acres and two miles of beachfront out there that I'm pretty confident will remain the same through the generations.

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

CE: I believe that the most ominous threat to the coastline is the same as it was 40, 50, 60 years ago, going back to when oil was first being developed. And now the play that we see even today in the House of Representatives to remove the safeguards, the moratoriums, regarding the coast so that companies can go and get that oil and develop those leases. It is absolutely wrong to think that that is going change what is happening in the cost of our gas or that we are going to benefit as a society on an appreciable level. The risks are far greater. I experienced those. We've all experienced them now in the Valdez and again in the Gulf, and this is not what should be done. And yet, here this is again. It's like zombies coming back, saying, "we need to develop that oil." And I believe every one of those voices that is being paid to push that forward. They are being paid and they're being paid by the oil interests to take that storyline. And I believe that there's got to be a response that is just as strong or stronger, saying, "no, what is most valuable is our natural resource, the fisheries, that exist out there." As we watch worldwide as the fisheries collapse, why should we put them in jeopardy by trying to develop oil in these high seismic areas where we know now that the failsafe devices are anything but that. This happened in the Gulf. "Can't possibly happen. Can't possibly happen again." Wrong! So I believe we have to be very vigilant, because I can see it already. The creeping aspect of wanting to go after that oil because it's going to make us a stronger country. I don't believe that for a moment. And I will not be a voice that is silent in that regard.

Toby: We, the three of us in this room, came from an activist generation. We had lots to complain about and we had the notion for. I don't feel that's true about today's generation, the

generation that's going through high school and college now. How do they become more active, but more importantly, if they were to ask you, why should they become more active when it comes to the California coastline?

CE: I believe students and young people today must be more active in regard to the coastline because they, better than any generation, can see the consequence of man's actions. And with regard to the coastline, whether it be the development of inappropriate buildings, whether it be the development of gas and oil, whether it be liquefied natural gas, any of these, we have to be vigilant. And the activism that I would like to see, I believe it is there and it will come into play when it is appropriate. It's just that there are so many demands put on all of us, and particularly young people, for their time, for their interest, for their news sources. But when it happens, I certainly believe that the Gulf is going to have a new level of activism that is born out of that terrible experience they've gone through. Does that mean that people in Arizona will be more activist? I don't know, but I would think there are going to be some who get the message. But it certainly is true that those here in California, where the coast is at risk, and where you can see it on a daily basis, not only what we have, but what is being lost. It doesn't take a whole lot to connect those dots and understand we can't let it happen again. And the fact that the coast has been protected to the level that it has is because of the Santa Barbara oilspill and the conscious decisions that have been made appropriately, and largely, by those that are here to fight for it. And we have to do it in such a manner that it has impact on those who can overwhelm us with votes and money from other sectors. It's a terrible game that is being played, but we are at high stakes poker, and the coast of California is the pot.

Toby: If President Obama were to call you and say, "Charlie, I'm going to grant you one favor, a single favor, in regard to protecting the California coast," what favor would you ask.

CE: If I were to ask the President to do one thing, it would be not only to extend and stand by the moratoriums that have been put in place, but to find some way that they would always be there. I know previous presidents—Clinton—took action when he created special standing for all the little islands that are out there. These things do have consequence. We have the areas that, by presidential action, are wilderness areas and such. I believe that the oceans one day...we're going to turn to them and say, "we still have an opportunity to obtain food from the ocean if we protect it in an appropriate fashion and manage that marine environment." And I don't believe that we can manage those issues in conjunction with developing gas and oil. So I think that the one thing is to find a way for all time to end gas and oil development in the coastal waters, or from onshore into the coastal waters. We have, I believe, hundreds of thousands that have already been leased onshore for gas and oil development. That's where it should take place, not in what is probably man's greatest resource, the ocean. So if he's listening, let's go there.

[tape 2 starts here]

JB: In the days after the cleanup, how did you react to it?

CE: I don't believe there was ever a cleanup and certainly not in regard to the Isla Vista area. What was taking place down at the harbor with the straw in the pictures we see, that was an effort, and it was focused, but as this moved around, I mean 800 square miles or more, there wasn't an ability, or even an interest in the cleanup. So it was more over time being a student,

and also being a very important time in what was the social and student unrest with regard to the Viet Nam war and other things, there was a lot going on. And so it wasn't this one question, but it was the environmental degradation on top of the world social justice issues. I remember vividly the Black Students Union was coming to its own. So we had a number of things that as a young person I was experiencing. This was just one that was really very strong and on a regular basis, thrust back in front of us because of the ocean tides and the oil just continuing to come out.

JB: Did you become involved in the campaign to pass Proposition 20, which created the Coastal Act in California?

CE: I do not recall being directly involved in Proposition 20, but it was an aspect of supporting. At that same time, I do remember my first real activist role was in regards to a development on the Gaviota Coast that was proposed, where there was going to be, as I recall, 3000 home built. So there was a community, again, turning against such a situation. And I do remember for the first time really going door-to-door, leafleting, and being involved in stopping a project that I could not agree with.

JB: And then you told me a little bit earlier, and if you could summarize this really as concisely as you can, your involvement in the Pt. Conception LNG project.

CE: One of the things that I believe I really benefited from in regard to the oil spill was this understanding of how man and nature were at odds, and essentially they were many wars going on. And a few years later, I found myself in a position of responsibility where, as the manager of the Holister Ranch, to the north of Santa Barbara, an upscale community with eight miles of beach front, I found as manager I was also now very involved in what was known as liquefied natural gas at Point Conception. It was a scheme to bring liquefied natural gas from Indonesia, offload it at a new facility that was to be built at Cojo Bay and this was to save California from all sorts of terrible things. And it was bogus.

And my role...I was able as the manager to manifest a lot of the feelings and experiences that came about from the oil spill and focus that experience and oppose something that was just as dangerous and stood to make a terrible impact on the state of California. And to this day, I recognize that I would not have been nearly as effective as I was if it hadn't been for the experience during the oil spill. So it's one of the stories that for me continued and actually gave me a foundation and a learning experience that came back, I think, to be a very important in the environmental history of our community, our county, even the state.

JB: How would you say the 1969 oil spill affected your life?

CE: The 1969 oil spill...I regard it as the pivotal event. I know at that time, as a student, I didn't know where I was going, what I would be doing, and yet, as I graduated, and went to work with the U.S. Forest Service, fighting fires, found myself in choosing to seek a very rural environment to live and work in, it became that now my context with the environment had been enhanced and I know there are many occasions where it was this feeling that I was able to speak up, or speak to others, in regard to what was the purpose, why were we doing this specific thing. Was it an environmentally sound issue?

The oil spill took place before there was anything like environmental studies. You did not have the opportunity to go to the university and go through a course of work that would give you the understanding that now so many have taken advantage of. The environmental studies at UCSB was a direct result of the oil spill. It was a reaction of the students, the community and the university to create something of relevance. And it went hand-in-hand with what the student and social unrest of that time, which, there again, we were seeking relevance in our education. And I do believe, having been committed, for 27 years, being on the board of Get Oil Out, and during that time, having been called upon to oppose the oil industry that sought to make the Santa Barbara area the third most industrialized area in the western hemisphere, with project upon project. I fought those as hard as I could. My family, my wife, my small children were all involved in opposing that development. And for the most part, we were very successful. And I do believe we had a very valuable role that we played, and it came to us from the experience largely that I had had in 1969 with oil on the beaches, the birds and marine mammals and the fish dying en masse.

JB: What advice would you give to high school age students, college age kids, about what they can do to protect the coast and the environment?

CE: I believe we are going to have challenges now and forever in regard to the coast of California, the desire to develop industry offshore oil, to do things that they now consider...the industry considers safe, to slant drill from land miles into the sea, and yet we know that this is geologically an unstable area. So what are the consequences of earthquakes, etc.? What I would suggest that children do is they open their eyes to what we have and realize that it can be lost, destroyed, or certainly made so ugly it's intolerable just because of a mistake that it made. It could be human error, it could be a catastrophic event. So it would be incumbent on school children to learn, to read, to listen, to ask questions, and to not accept that industry has the answers.

And I think that this is it. When I was growing up, when I was a student, there was a saying: "Question authority." I suggest it is to question those who tell you, "we have all the answers." It's going to be safe. Don't worry about a thing. All we have to do today is look at the Gulf and what happened there with regard to these blowout prevention devices that were infallible. It's not infallible. We have to look to Japan to see what a natural event of that nature did, and I would ask again, and I always do as we see these issues come back, and there are those who would say, "there is not problem, only benefit."

And again putting pipes and derricks and onshore facilities to support oil and gas in our community because there is always that question of what is going to go wrong. And it is now my experience to suggest eventually things do go wrong, and when they go wrong badly and on the most horrible basis, it is unconscionable what we do in the impact. And when I look at the consequences of the Exxon Valdez and you look at what has happened in the Gulf, health issues, economic issues...these things will go on for lifetimes and we do not have the answers that the oil and gas industry would suggest we have. I would suggest there are other things going on onshore. I'm very concerned about this process called fracking, in which we are going after natural gas and in the process, maybe contaminating our water supplies that we all rely on. And

this will be something that as it plays out, I believe again, we're going to say we relied on false information and we are going to pay a very heavy price for that. So we have to wake up, open our eyes and say, "just a moment. Why can't we do things in a manner that clean and renewable energy is what we are after." It creates jobs and it creates a situation, an environment, that we can embrace rather than have to be worrying about when does it fail, when does it go wrong?

JB: If you got a call tomorrow from President Obama or Jerry Brown, asking you to be on a blue ribbon committee to suggest solutions or ways to prevent damage to the coast, protect the coast, what would be at the top of your list in terms of recommendations?

CE: If I were given the opportunity on a blue ribbon committee that had impact to suggest what should be done with the coast, I would be in a protection mode, a conservation mode. I have seen what happens when you try to compromise. And if you listen to the presentations, I remember those same type of blowout prevention devices being shared with our Board of Supervisors, where the industry walks in and says, "here, this is what will prevent oil from ever coming out and contaminating your coast." Well, we know that those devices for reasons, complicated reasons, and I would want to be a party that would say no. There have, in the past, been issues that I have considered carefully. I have gone with a majority that have suggested, "no, we can work with the industry," but today, after the Gulf spill, today after seeing what happens when tsunamis are unleashed by nature, I don't believe that there is a solution that is infallible and therefore we need to look at the alternatives. So I would be someone who would be very hard-pressed to bring me to a conciliatory situation. I would be doubtful that the industry really can always and without any crack in the armor suggest that we are going to be safe from contamination that they caused for economic reasons.

JB: We're going to just switch and get a little bit, slightly different emphasis, and then we take the best of all the takes, but you're really good.

Toby Younis (TY): If you would start your reply with the question and secondly, a lot of my questions are going to be very much oriented toward coastal protection.

TY: What is your name, occupation and what environmental or coastal protection organizations do you represent?

CE: My name is Charlie Eckberg. I am very involved in Get Oil Out, 27 years on the board of directors, and as you can tell from the name, our mission is to keep oil out of the Santa Barbara Channel. We have, because of other issues, we have consequence and a standing on these things that happen worldwide and we get involved as we are asked to about solutions or bringing the understanding to the public. I have been very involved with the University of California, in particular the Bren School of Environmental Science and Management. And one of the main course paths out there that is offered to students is in regard to the marine environment and how to protect it and how to work on a daily basis to see that the things that we do are done correctly. So I always come back to the coastal protection, and for example, with Get Oil Out, we often rely on other organizations, such as Santa Barbara's Environmental Defense Center, which is the legal arm that we, Get Oil Out, turn to them. We become the client as we may sue, or take a legal action. Or even in regard to just making public statements in regard to protecting the coast.

So there are many different ways that I can be involved and I choose to be involved and it's just often "where can I be most effective given the circumstances and the time that I have available."

TY: Back in 1969, how old were you and how were you occupying your time?

CE: In 1969, when the oil blowout occurred, I was a student at UCSB. It was my junior year. I was in my first job managing apartment. My apartment was right on the beach which put me in a context with the oil that came to the beach. I was a student involved in watching and learning every facet and one of the issues at that time was student unrest, the opposition to the Viet Nam War. And I was very actively opposed to that war and have remained committed to the values that I learned and I found in myself at that time. I was very involved as a student in having a good time. And that was one of the aspects, that you balance your life, and that you find that things are all there and it's maybe how you choose and the decisions you make and some of my activities...they were thrust on me. To be involved in regard to the oil spill because I lived right on the beach. There was no escaping the daily consequence and it did change my life.

TY: On that day, when you walked out to the beach the first time to see the results of the blowout. Tell me a little bit about what you saw and how it made you feel.

CE: When I first saw the effects of the blowout, I (along with many others) did go down to Santa Barbara and watch from a distance what was going on...not understanding it, reading in the paper, watching on the local television. But when I was in my home, my apartment and the beach right at my front yard essentially was now fouled, it was something that I felt a deep sickness. I think there was also at that time a real understanding that this is what man was capable of in the worst way.

As I mentioned, I was opposed to war, but I had not experienced war. Here I was experiencing environmental degradation of the worst kind. And so it was something that my senses were very opened...and it was something that on every level was almost more than you can handle. And I will NEVER forget and I will sometimes draw on that experience of the animals that were covered with this tar, this black goo. And you knew there would not be any survival for them.

And even as we would take them to the centers in Santa Barbara, where they would try to clean them, we understood that it was a very small chance that any of these animals would survive. And I find that today I'm involved with the Wildlife Care Network. I spent last weekend driving 125 miles to go and bring a blue heron that had been crippled probably by a car, to a care facility where it could be treated. I look into the eyes of these birds...it's just like 40 some years ago; the same pleading in those eyes of, "help me!" And so the story goes on, it's just new chapters all the time.

Toby: In the 2-3 months after the spill, how did you react to this event personally?

CE: In the months after the spill, it was something that...a wearing down of the psyche that I think I experienced because it was a constant feature that was in my experience...and even when

the oil seemed to be gone, you understood that with the next tide, with the next change in wind, with the next release in that the oil was not permanently stopped...it could be back, and it would be just be again this experience over and over.

So I remember becoming very tired of the experience and where it had been my greatest pleasure to have this opportunity for the first time, to live right on the beach, now it was something that wasn't fun at all. And in fact it was something that was, I remember the oil and tar was everywhere now as you carried it back into your home; into the properties that were managed.

It was something that was a constant reminder that this was not going away. And in fact and in many ways, it was years before the environment was able to clean itself up. And so it was just always something that from that point forward, I found my real enjoyment inland and started to really discover the mountains. So for me that was the new place to go and to experience the love of nature.

Toby: How were you involved in the clean up, if you were involved?

CE: I don't recall personally being involved in the clean up of the oil as we understand at that time, it was through straw being thrown on the oil to absorb it. These absorbent papers were being put down. There was very little else that could be done. My involvement really became an aspect of observing and seeing when animals were washed up and were in distress. I would put on the clothes that I kept that were already fouled and would never be cleaned, and I would go down and do the best that I could with whatever help I could get to bring those animals as appropriate into a center where they were cared for. And so that was really what I could do and it was something that at that point in time, being a student, I think the other thing that I really could do, was really open myself up to hear the messages and discussion and the conversation that was going on. Because there was some really important people that came to our community and they said some really important things.

And then it was to see what would happen with these things. And I think that that was another aspect that my understanding of the federal government, the state government was for the first time was really manifesting in something that I would personally being touched by other than the Viet Nam war.

This is certainly a catharsis going through this.

Toby: One of the by-products of the oil spill was the democratic political activism that led to Prop. 20. How were you involved in that, if at all?

CE: In regard to Proposition 20 and what was certainly a grassroots movement to protect the coast, I was totally in support of it. But I don't recall being involved in any significant manner...(I) certainly voted...yes I did vote on Proposition 20...trying to remember just where I was at that point? And it was something, Proposition 20, I mean it's been a very important initiative that's helped California through the years and the Coastal Commission and different things have been very critical. But I don't recall being one of those that got out in that regard. And my real activism was slow to boil, but as it came about and I had different opportunities that

thrust me into these situations, it became something that I did build on and valued as being one of my core values. And I am an activist to this date.

Toby: How does the organization that you...

[remainder of interview currently missing]