



Transcript of Video Interview with Bob Sollen, recorded 2006.

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Interview with Bob Sollen by Janet Bridgers of Earth Alert.

JB: Welcome viewers to another episode of *Heroes of the Coast*. This is the program that brings you the personal stories of people who have dedicated their lives to protecting the California coast for the rest of us. My guest today is Bob Sollen. Bob Sollen is a writer and author, a former reporter, who has dedicated much of his life to writing about environmental issues. Bob, it's great to have you with us.

Bob: Thank you for inviting me.

JB: Bob, we're going to jump right into the story about the Santa Barbara oil spill, but tell us just briefly how you happened to be in a place to observe this close-hand.

Bob: Well, I was reporter for the *Santa Barbara News-Press*. And in 1968, when the federal government began to sell leases off the Santa Barbara coast, the News-Press decided there should be somebody concentrating on that particular activity. So I was on that beat for almost a year before the blowouts in 1969. And I stayed on that beat for 17 years until I retired, so that's how I happened to be on-scene.

JB: Well, then, you had enough for more than one book on this subject. Bob has written a book—*An Ocean of Oil: A Century of Political Struggle over Petroleum off the California Coast*. But did you have any inkling that something the magnitude of what happened might happen?

Bob: Yes, two months before the event, I wrote a series of articles, three or four for the News-Press. And the lead paragraph in the first story said something like, "it would take some doing for the oil industry to pollute Santa Barbara Channel, or a major part of it, but they have the capability or the possibility of doing that."

JB: This was just a couple months?

Bob: In November of '68. I could see the thing coming because there was a rush and there were inadequate regulations, and well, I guess I had an emotional feeling for it. And I didn't think primarily of a oil well blowout. I thought of spills. I thought of tanker accidents, a number of things that could happen, and this is one that did happen.

JB: And then tell us exactly how you became informed of it. Did somebody call you in the middle of the night?

Bob: No, not in the middle of the night. The blowouts occurred on January 28, but it was six-seven miles offshore. And the only people who knew about it were the people who were on the platform at the time. And there was an attempt to keep it quiet. Maybe it will go away. And the next morning at my desk at the News-Press, late in the morning we got a call and it was a male voice. It said, "the

ocean is boiling around Platform A.” And I started to ask questions and this person said, “the ocean is boiling around Platform A. Goodbye.” And I don’t know to this day who that person was. But I had to make some calls then and I finally got verification of it from the Coast Guard and took it from there.

And no officials in the City or the County had been advised of this at that time. That was 24 hours later.

JB: You were like one of the first or second people to know about it.

Bob: As far as I know, except for those who were out there on the platform and in the oil boats, the service boats.

JB: And did you know exactly what that meant, that “the ocean is boiling.” That meant something to you?

Bob: Yes. Well, there was a loss of pressure down in the well and that was forcing oil up. I didn’t know...there was a geological failure. There was a regulatory failure. None of that did we know immediately.

JB: How fast did the oil start coming ashore?

Bob: Well, it depends on what shore you’re talking about. It didn’t come ashore at Santa Barbara for a few days. It did hit some of the islands and it hit north and south of Santa Barbara. But it was a few days before it got ashore. I think it was on East Beach.

JB: And what was Union Oil saying all this time? Did they begin releasing...

Bob: They attempted to minimize it. They said, “just leave it up to us. We’ll take care of this. You’re making too much of this.” The Coast Guard was in on this by this time and getting very feisty, as it should have. And they were saying, “this is a major catastrophe,” and Union Oil said, “it’s nothing. We’ll have it cleaned up in a day or so.”

JB: So there was no...What was the set-up at the time for clean up? I know obviously we got much more into that after the Valdez.

Bob: It was like everything else with the industry at the time. Offshore oil industry here was very very new. And there were not federal and state adequate regulations for controlling it, much less for cleaning it up, if it ever happened. So there wasn’t any real advance plan to cope with something like this. Nobody knew what to do about it. The oil was coming up out of the bottom of the ocean by this time. The ocean bottom was fragmented. And it was uncontrolled. So all you do was wait until it came to the beach and then clean it up and the high tech technique at the time was straw. Dump straw on the beach and then pick up the straw, which absorbed the oil. And that went on for weeks. So truck after truck after truck came in with loads of straw. It was strewn on the beach. I’m sure everybody’s seen those pictures. And that was the technique for cleaning up the beach for several weeks.

JB: Now what was much more poignant in terms of footage and photographs was the photographs of the birds that were impacted.

Bob: It was one tragic scene of a bird and a vehicle had run across it, and it was saturated with oil, obviously dead. And we called it the picture that went around the world, because we put it on the, I guess, AP wires, and it was picked up and seen in newspapers all around the world.

JB: And the good side of what happened was that there was a big public response. Let's start talking about that.

Bob: There was a big public response and it didn't have to be initiated. It was initiated in 1897-1898 when the first offshore wells were built off Summerland and Carpenteria.

JB: You know, I had no idea that oil drilling went back that far.

Bob: It was...well, it's over a century now. The first offshore wells in the world were drilled off Carpenteria and Summerland on the end of piers, which were not built for oil drilling. They were built for boat moorings, small boats. But oil had been discovered onshore, so the industry thought, "there must be some offshore, too." And there was no regulation of offshore oil drilling, because there was no offshore drilling until that time. And since then, the public agencies—state and federal—have been trying to keep up with the oil industry that comes up with something new every year. Then you've got to have a new regulation for it. But it never caught up, and from that day on, Santa Barbara coastal residents were up in arms against the oil industry.

So when this happened in 1969, there was nothing new, except in intensity and the community was just 101% against what was happening.

JB: I've heard that...You said 101%, but you have pictures of even Montecito matrons hauling tarry birds in their expensive cars. Everybody got out to help. It wasn't just vocal. They became participants in the clean up.

Bob: Absolutely.

JB: And this is called "the environmental shot heard 'round the world." Now, do you agree with that?

Bob: I didn't for a long, long time, but so many people have referred to it in that way that I suppose it did have that impact. I was so busy covering the event day by day, I didn't stop to think, "My goodness. This must be the shot heard 'round the world." I was just covering a major story.

JB: How long did it go on, your daily coverage of this one particular event?

Bob: Until I retired 17 years later. Primarily, for about a year, at the end of December that same year, there was another oil rupture. I don't know if it was from the same platform or not. But the News-Press ran a little box on page one every day. "Oil spill in its 310th day. When will it end?" "Oil spill in its 311th day," etc. until they got tired of printing it. So it was a long term thing. I shouldn't get into too many details, but the event ruptured the bottom of the ocean, what we call the

“caprock,” which was very fragile and that’s when the oil and the gas escaped. And how do you control anything like that?

JB: It’s pretty hard to patch things on the ocean floor.

Bob: You just wait until it ends.

JB: So on a daily basis, you’re writing about it and every body’s reading about it. But then starts to happen out there in the community. Well, first of all, the tar. And you still get tar on the beach, right? From this?

Bob: Well, offshore Santa Barbara area there are natural seeps that have been going on for nobody knows how long. Again, it’s oil and gas accumulation under the bottom of the ocean and not enough caprock to really contain it. So, from time to time, quite a bit comes up from the bottom of the ocean. This was before the spill and since it.

JB: So there’s always been some.

Bob: There’s always been oil out there. So when we had a rash of oil on the beach, every time after this, a big debate. Are they natural seeps, or are they oil spills. And many times we never knew. The Coast Guard had techniques for determining whether it was natural or industrial, but each time they had to bring back samples to a laboratory many miles away and spend days analyzing it. And it wasn’t done on every occasion. It got to be tedious.

JB: So the effects at this point are more political. There was this one quote from the president of Union Oil, which I thought was outrageous. He said, “I don’t like to call it a disaster, because there’s been no loss of human life. I’m amazed at the publicity for the loss of a few birds.”

Bob: This was what was wrong with looking at it then, and we haven’t entirely gotten over that. Of course, I know there was no loss of human life. There might have been a few inconveniences. But what was a few birds? Well, we don’t know how many birds there were. We don’t know how many marine mammals were affected. Marine life and shore bird life was seriously affected. But... Well, Union Oil looked at it that way.

I can’t say Santa Barbara did, because there were more people volunteering to go out and try oil off the birds than for anything. It was a big volunteer effort...not especially effective, because we didn’t know how to clean birds at that time. Since then, means have been devised so that it’s much more effective. But the people here were concerned about wildlife.

[gap in tape]

So the Environmental Defense Center, so in Santa Barbara, there were not really waves, it was always going on. So if there were waves of this movement, that was probably reflected more in other communities.

[another gap]

National media

Bob: It was hard to keep the press interested for a long time. The News-Press stayed on it. And the national/international press stayed on the '69 blowouts for about 10 days, and then it was an old story. It wasn't an old story here. It was still coming at us. But after a few days, the newspapers...didn't have much television at the time...got tired of it. Something else must be happening, so let's go out and find it.

JB: Let's switch to the current day and oil...There's been a long moratorium on drilling, correct?

Bob: Yes, congressional.

JB: And that's about to change?

Bob: Well, what happened just the other day on it? Oh, a court ruling. There were two things that happened. An effort to end the moratorium was part of a rider on a Congressional bill and that was withdrawn, because they saw it wasn't going anywhere. And then a federal court ruled, just a few days ago, that the federal government could buy back, should buy back these 36 ancient leases out here that have never been developed. And that got mixed response.

I thought it was probably a good idea, because the oil companies that possess these leases would relinquish them. The problem was that the court ruling said the federal government should repay the oil companies what the original lease bidders had paid. But the major oil companies have since sold these to lesser oil companies, smaller oil companies, at a much smaller figure. So it seems to me, it stands to reason that they should be reimbursed only what they put into it and not what the original price was.

The other problem is if the federal government does buy back these leases, would it go into the moratorium, or would these leases be reoffered for sale, and that's up in the air right now. It has yet to be determined.

JB: And if you would, please comment about the issue of states' rights relative, and the authority of the Coastal Commission, for example.

Bob: One piece of legislation that was passed—federal legislation—was the Coastal Zone Management Act, which is still in effect. And that says, among other things, that before the federal government can lease its own waters, which are outside of the state jurisdiction, it must go to the states for a determination whether it has an adverse effect on the state coastal plan, each individual state coastal plan. So that when the federal government offered leases off our shores, from that point on, it had to refer to the state and the state had to determine whether it had an impact on its state coastal plan. And the state agency that made that determination was the Coastal Commission.

So we had a pretty good grip on federal leasing from that point on. But, of course, by that time, so many leases had been granted by the federal government that the oil industry itself couldn't keep up with the offerings that were made. So that's one of the reasons we've got these 36 undeveloped leases out there, which had a five-year term...that the oil companies couldn't develop these leases within the length of the five-year term of the lease. So the federal government had to keep extending the lease time.

JB: Are you optimistic that California will be able to continue to control its own coastline?

Bob: It's done so well and it has so many good agencies, starting with the state government and the Coastal Commission, and all the environmental groups that have after a point, stopped any more leasing or oil development, although it's been a tremendous burden on the state and the environmental movement. They have succeeded in every case in stopping it. Although it didn't prohibit it, it just said to the federal government, "before you can do this, you have to abide by this regulation, or this law, or provide this kind of justification." And so we sent them back to the drawing boards 100 times, to keep coming at us. Somebody called from the News-Press the other day and said, "did you win this fight?" I said, "no, it's like guerrilla warfare. We're never going to win it. We just have to keep the other side from winning."

JB: Bob, we're in the last minute or so of our time together, but I thank you for that insight into the fact that this is not a battle that is ever done. One of my favorites is Thomas Jefferson's statement that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance which generalizes to environmental issues as well. And I also want to thank you for becoming involved after your career as a journalist. Do you have any comment briefly about what is always thrown up as objectivism in journalism?

Bob: We have always objected...we, I think, people in journalism object to the term objectivism because it has come to mean, although it is not the real meaning, giving every point of view equal space, equal column inches, equal time on television. Not every point of view merits that much time until it has some substance. And so we have emphasized some things and de-emphasized others. We have used our judgment. This is where the conflict comes in.

JB: Is your book available?

Bob: It is available, yes.

JB: Through Amazon?

Bob: No.

JB: Okay, if you're interested in Bob Sollen's book, please email info@earthalert.org and we'll forward the request to Bob Sollen. Thank you very much for watching and we hope you'll join us again soon for another episode of *Heroes of the Coast*.

[end of interview]