



Transcript of Video Interview with Bob Duncan, 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.

During this interview, recorded for the *Stories of the Spill* documentary, Janet and Bob are looking at a book of photographs that Bob took of the oil spill.

Janet Bridgers (JB): So Bob, for the front of the tape, tell us your name and occupation and any affiliation you might have with companies or organizations.

BD: Well, my name is Bob Duncan. I live in Carpenteria, California. I'm retired. I have several hobbies, photography particularly one of them. Secondly I belong to several organizations. I'm on the board of directors of a couple companies, a couple fire districts, and what have you. So I'm pretty busy.

JB: And what were you doing in 1969, when the...

BD: I was actually in the automotive business. The next year, I went into the solar energy business, which was nice, to try to overcome some of these oil issues we had with OPEC coming on and what have you. I ended up the next 15-20 years in the solar energy business.

JB: You remember what you were doing, where you were, when you first heard about the spill?

BD: I was at work and it blew and we heard these rumors, and a lot of things were going on. And until about four or five days later, actually the oil had not moved ashore yet, and it was sort of a really big deal. I made national news once the impact of this really hit us. We could smell it, obviously, before we could even see it.

JB: I see. And so...but you obviously were a very good photography, and so your impulse was to grab a camera?

BD: Well, I have a camera with me a lot of times. I didn't get down to the beach to take pictures until about four or five days later. And at that point in time, they had massed workforces and even prisoners—clean-up crews. They had brought a lot of hay and supplies in, and they pretty well had clean-up production going.

JB: So that would be in these pictures you've taken here.

BD: Well, we've got a picture of one in the harbor there's a boat spreading hay, it's spreading hay on the surface, and then it shows pictures of cleanup crews, some wearing the yellow slickers.

JB: And those were the prisoners?

BD: Those were the prisoners. And you see also with the blue shirts. And what they'd do, they'd collect hay and put it up in piles, very time-consuming, very laborious, really. One pitchfork of that stuff with hay was probably quite weighty, even in itself, once it absorbed the hay, the oil.

JB: And were there any (this is a great picture, one of my favorites). And was there any public outcry about the use of the prisoners?

BD: No, there was no problem with that. It was hard to even get volunteers. That's pretty nasty work, once you start wading into that, even trying to breathe. You notice here, the precautions they took in the Gulf, with this latest spill we had, versus here, the fellows aren't wearing any protection really at all.

JB: Tell me how you felt as all of this was happening, what was your emotional reaction to...?

BD: Well, Santa Barbara is sort of a special place and frankly, people come from all over the world to visit here and to live here. I feel privileged and I think most people that live in Santa Barbara feel privileged. It was really besmirching our beaches and our habitat. We were not that fond of having oil out there in the first place. And I guess, things come true sooner or later, if it's out there something's going to happen, sooner or later.

JB: Tell me more about how you actually took these pictures, because you were right down there, on the beach to take these pictures.

BD: I'm fortunate all these photos even lasted all these years. Usually they deteriorate, slides particularly. I always shoot Kodachrome, which is high quality color pictures, and I was even surprised myself when I dug these up several years ago that the color quality was still there. Having looked around on the Internet and stuff, frankly, there's no pictures in color at all to speak of, just one or two that I've ever found. Fortunately, I had 50 of them, and I'm more than pleased to have you and your organization use these for educational purposes.

JB: Thank you! So were these pictures all taken within a very short period of time?

BD: They were taken the same day.

JB: They were? And how far was that after the end...

BD: It was about the 5th day.

JB: So would you say that again in one sentence, with "these pictures were taken..."

BD: taken about the fifth day...

TY: (Toby Younis, the videographer) Take a little break. Ask the question again and answer with...

JB: ...a complete sentence.

BD: I don't do sentences.

TY: No, you're doing fine.

BD: Okay.

TY: That's why we have SD cards. We have four hours' worth of SD cards.

JB: Over what frame of time were these pictures taken?

BD: They were all taken on the same day, about five days after the spill.

JB: And what happened with you personally? Did you become involved in the cleanup or with the birds or in any way?

BD: No, I was too busy with my occupation to do that, but I felt like everyone else, I cut up my Union Oil card, and we had protests in town. And several organizations came about, like Get Oil Out, you've heard of them, obviously. And to me, in a way, ironically, this became...what I feel...is the beginning of the environmental movement in this country, an awareness thing was taking place. It can happen in other places in the world, but it can't happen here in our country. And this, we had Robert Sollen is his name, with the News Press, sort of really opened up the world to our calamity with his great writings on the particular catastrophe, which went on for several weeks. His particular writings were quite cognizant.

JB: Did you become involved in any of the groups? You said you joined them. You mean as a member or were you active within the organization?

BD: Enough just to be a member, pay dues and what have you and support their efforts.

JB: And there were a lot...did you become active in political campaigns, more than just voting?

BD: I'd already been active in political campaigns. I'm not against oil. I realize we have to use oil. We get by in our cars and that's the way we live, off of oil. But I'm also very much into conservation. Two years after this spill, I ended up with a 15-year career in solar energy.

JB: (looking at a photo) Look at all that straw. That's amazing.

BD: This one photo with the derricks and the hay stacked up, some of those hay stacks were 30 feet high and they were bringing them in by the truckload, by the truckload, trying to absorb...a very primitive way to try and remove oil. Their techniques are much different today, using detergents, which I disagree with, because it just puts everything on the bottom and frankly, most of our harbor right today is probably oil-laden down below. It just doesn't really go away. There are microbes that eat some of these oils they've found and this and that, but in time, it will be totally gone, but the remnants are still there.

JB: There was a state political campaign in 1972 that was inspired by the spill, the Prop 20 campaign. Were you involved in that at all?

BD: As much as giving to organizations financially.

JB: How, in just a sentence, how would you say the 1969 oil spill affected your life?

BD: It really didn't change anything. I became more conservation-minded and I think most of my friends were doing the same, and I think it was a wake-up call, which we really haven't absorbed today, 40 years later, sadly to say.

JB: Let's say that whole sentence over, because I interrupted you. How did the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill affect your life?

BD: Well, it did. I became more conservation-minded, but frankly, we haven't learned our lesson yet. We're too busy with our lives to really get too involved in totally make things work without using these fossil fuels that can be dangerous to us in a number of different ways. It affects our foreign policy abroad and it affects our health and welfare here in our country.

JB: Do you have children and grandchildren?

BD: No, I don't.

JB: But imagine if you were speaking to a group of high school or college students about what they might do to protect the California coastline, what would you say to them?

BD: Well, they've got to find alternatives to this fuel. I drove over here today. I had the fuel to do that. To heat my home, I have to have some kind of fuel to do that. We just fought a great battle down in Carpinteria where I live against Veneco, drilling from onshore to offshore. And we had a tremendous fight that took us several years to defeat that. We just can't let these people come in with their money and their wherewithal, and their bribes, per se, convince locals that they should do this which will end up ruining their community.

JB: And if you were appointed to a blue ribbon panel by the governor, or the President, what would your top recommendation be to resolve the problem?

BD: I think conservation, right now, and finding alternatives to using fossil fuels, mass transit, and so on.

JB: So Toby, is there anything we need to go back over?

TY: We're going to do a second take, make a few minor changes, so why don't you just relax for a second.

JB: Bob, would you, for the record, tell us your name and your occupation and your affiliation with organizations?

TY: (talking to Bob about his sitting position)

BD: My name is Bob Duncan and I'm retired. I live in Carpinteria, California. I've been out here in the Santa Barbara area since 1964 and have loved every minute of it.

JB: And what were you doing in 1969?

BD: I was in the automotive business, and two years later, I got into the energy business. That's one of the first...we felt like pioneers, we were in the solar energy business for making domestic hot water.

JB: Do you remember where you were, what you were doing, how you first heard about the oil spill?

BD: Trying to recall that. I think I was at work and we heard about the spill. I can't remember exactly...I know it was January 28th when it happened. The impact I can't quite describe to you because we didn't see anything for a couple of days, until the oil came ashore. Thought it was maybe just a minor leak out there in the Channel and then ended up being a harbor full of oil in four or five days.

JB: Do you remember how you felt when you first saw all the oil in the harbor?

BD: I think, in a way, we sort of expected something like that. I mean you just can't do some of the stuff they were doing in a channel that's earthquake-prone, without maybe someday something happening. And there it came about.

JB: You have all these photos. Tell us about the day that you decided to take photos.

BD: Well, I went down. This was about the fifth or sixth day. Finally they were bringing a lot of machinery and manpower in to start some kind of cleanup. I don't think they'd had this experience anywhere in the United States that I can think of, experience in doing this, so it was sort of haphazard. I think they were throwing everything against the wall, hoping something would stick. They had boats out in the harbor, which were spreading hay and hoping to absorb this massive amount of oil. Actually, there was so much oil there, it looked like four or five inches on the surface, there was no wave action and instead of the water being blue or blue-greenish color, it was black, which was very strange. I notice in the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, their oil is sort of a brown color. This is unique. We must have a different grade that is just pitch, pitch black. And there was very little wave action even coming onto the beaches. It made this funny little slurry sound when it came ashore, sort of weird. And the smell was overwhelming.

JB: Who'd they get to do all this work?

BD: They had volunteers, they had paid people and they had prisoners. And a lot of these pictures that you might be looking at, you'll see the fellow wearing the slickers, the yellow slickers and the denim shirts were prisoners. They brought them in. Of course, they paid them to do this, but this is really totally nasty work. Pitchfork by pitchfork of oil-laden hay, which is very heavy, by the way. They were bringing them up and throwing them on these huge piles, then the bulldozers would push the piles around and it was sort of ironic, at the same time, they were disturbing some of the minute vertebrae in the soil. The seagulls and birds were coming, like sandpipers, but in doing that, they were covering themselves with oil, too. They were coming in to get the bugs and the different insects that were in...the crustaceans...that were in soil.

JB: Let's say that sentence again, from when you were saying they were shoveling by the pitchfork, but in doing so...

TY: The impact of the shoveling and the grading...

BD: And the grading, yeah, the bulldozers. It was sort of ironic in the cleanup period of shoveling, let's say a pitchfork full of oil-laden straw, which is very heavy, by the way, and putting them into piles. Then the bulldozers would push those into stacks. When the bulldozers would push them into stacks, you'd have a lot of seabirds coming in to eat on the crustaceans that they normally would have fed on, now exposed, but they were also exposing themselves to the oil itself.

And you see in some of the pictures, they had some pretty massive bulldozers and equipment to do this. There's one picture in there, as I recall, that shows stacks of hay. This is regular hay. It's not like oat hay, like eating hay. It's like straw. They'd have them stacked up 30- to 40-feet high and trucks constantly bringing those in, and as they were unloading, with derricks onto boats, or throwing this stuff on the beach to absorb the oil coming ashore.

And the manpower...they built these little dingy boats, and they'd have two guys in it, and they'd have a barrel in the center and they would go out and around the harbor area, around the boats and they would pick up this straw with pitchforks again and put it in the barrel that was inbetween between the two on these little tiny boat. It really wasn't very effective, I don't think, in getting much done.

They also had some big tankers come in, tanker trucks, and they were trying to siphon up some of the oil through these big hoses. But it fouled the complete harbor and absolutely fouled all the boats and put everybody in the boat business down there obviously out of business for a long time.

JB: What was your impression of how long it lasted?

BD: Well, it went on, to me, I think it was several weeks and you never really got it totally clean. I imagine a lot of the oil is, frankly, sitting on the bottom of our harbor, covered with the sands, layers of sand, that come down the coast in fill in above it. You can see some of it on the rocks. You see how stained the rocks are. And then they had to come in with steam and high pressure hoses to try and clean it off the rocks.

JB: That would have been much later, though, probably.

BD: Well, they were doing it the same period of time to try and clean up the oil here. You can see the tidal difference of how much the tide comes in.

Those are those little dingy boats with the oil...really nasty work.

JB: Does the phrase, “grasping at straws” apply?

BD: Yeah, absolutely. I don’t think they had the technical aspect...Using dispersants isn’t really the answer even today, because that just breaks it up and puts it on the bottom. You’re just putting it out of sight.

JB: (looking at a photo) Oh there’s one of those guys spraying. And you said all these pictures were taken the same day.

BD: The same day, yeah.

JB: They’re remarkable quality. The color is very bright.

BD: Well, I only shot Kodachrome II, which was a high quality color picture. There’s a little fading in them, but if I’d shot a different type of film, more than likely they wouldn’t...after these number of years, probably would have deteriorated.

JB: So were the photos just up in a box somewhere and you found them one day?

BD: Well, when we started talking about the different 35th anniversary, and then the 40th anniversary, someone knew I had pictures, so they asked me if they could use them. I let all the nonprofits use these for educational purposes, but I’ve sold some to newspapers. There are very few color pictures, which really surprises me. You’ve probably been online looking for some, maybe. There’s not many. And fortunately, I had about 50 or 75. I wish I’d taken more.

JB: Tell us how you feel the oil spill affected your life.

BD: Well, it put most anyone that’s into a conservation mode perhaps, but we still drive our cars, we still heat our homes and we seem to forget about it until something happened like the Gulf Spill that we had just recently. We’ve got to look for alternatives, and frankly, I don’t think we’re willing to pay that dues right now. With all the problems we have abroad with our suppliers internationally and all the conflicts that come from that, it’s a sad state of affairs that we’re so locked into fossil fuels the way we are.

JB: And if you were speaking to young people today, what would your advice be to them, to protect the coast, so that they can enjoy the coast in the future.

BD: Well, now they're going to open up oil exploration, I understand, on the East Coast of Florida particularly, maybe into the Carolinas and Georgia. We're going to start looking everywhere for oil because it's a finite product. We've got to find other ways of moving about—mass transit. We've got to find other ways to move ourselves about and to take care of ourselves without using these particular fossil fuels.

TY: Cut. Let's ask that question again, focused very much, because we want, Bob, this DVD is going to be shown to high school students, although what you said could be very oriented to...could we pick up on that, but if we could start by saying, "My advice to students in high schools and colleges right now would be to...." And then pick it up from there.

BD: Okay

TY: Because we want them to react to this, become active, be aware....I don't want to put words in your mouth, but let's focus the answer to that question on the students.

Take it from the top of the question, Janet.

JB: Bob, what would your advice be to young people, college and high school age students?

BD: I would say that the future is obviously theirs, and we haven't done a very good of preparing them for this future. I think they've got to take it upon themselves to become the conservationists, the real ones, that we say we are, but we're really not. That is to get a handle on it, to find new innovative ways for us to use energy. Secondly, it's very disappoint what my generation and the generation after me. We've basically done really nothing and this is an opportunity, with awareness of particularly this spill and spills like in the Gulf of Mexico just recently that we've got to take some action. And they've got to be proactive and figure a way through this. It's sad to say, but I don't think our politicians right now are going to do much for them.

JB: What if you were appointed to a panel by the governor or the President, what would your top recommendation be for protecting the coast?

BD: Well, look for alternative energy, obviously. We've basically, because this is such a different coast than most coasts, at least we consider it to be that, they're going to look to a lot of other coasts to do that, the coast of Florida, even on the Gulf of Mexico side. I was surprised to see how many oil wells there were in the Gulf. I couldn't believe it. Just thousands of them and they're all accidents waiting to happen. And we don't have the science or the technology to prevent these major disasters.

[end of interview]

