

The Sticky Truth



Santa Barbara's Unique Relationship to Oil

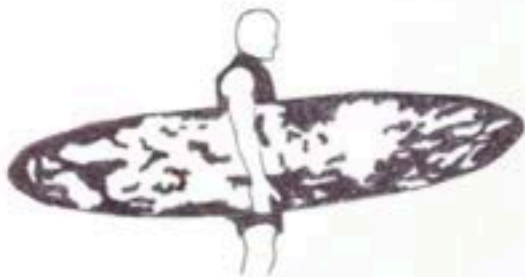
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WHEN LEILA NOURMAND was a freshman, double majoring in Film and Pharmacology and in the midst of the pandemic, she spent more time on the beach than at her house. When her professor claimed—over Zoom—that she had an antidote to the dark, sticky goo found on the beach, Nourmand quickly adopted the method. "Anytime I had tar on my feet I would have to suffer through this whole experience of rubbing mayonnaise to get it off," she remembers. "It is everything you imagine it to be and so much worse."

Isla Vista beaches are spaces familiar to residents as places to decompress and take in the view of the distant islands off the coast. However, it is almost impossible to avoid a symbol of oil everytime we enjoy our beaches. Platform Holly looms off the point, glowing at night, as trails of oil assemble at the high tide line in a nightly routine with the moon. While we tend to joke away the presence of Holly as the "Eiffel Tower of IV," we cannot ignore our unique relationship with oil in the place we call home.

Despite popular belief, tar is, for the most part, a natural phenomenon. IV sits atop vast reserves of crude oil—a naturally occurring, unrefined petroleum product—that has resided beneath the Santa Barbara Channel for thousands of years. In some places, the pressure is so great that crude oil seeps through cracks in the ocean floor, floating to the surface, and sometimes ending up on the underside of your feet.

Unlike other communities across the US, in IV we have a sensory relationship to oil—you can feel the oil on your feet, smell the oil in the ocean breeze, and swim through oil slicks floating in the water. While we know that much of this is from natural seepage, images of waves blackened by oil and beaches littered with dead wildlife in the wake of oil disasters haunt our collective memory.



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Tar balls are more than just pesky pieces of goo in need of a mayonnaise bath. Rather, they are a constant reminder of oil exploration off our shores and the remarkable history of environmental activism in our community. We cannot control the shifting nature of tectonic plates or the rearranging of underground pressures releasing more oil into the ocean through seeps, but we do have an obligation to remember why our community fought for the environmental protections we might take for granted today.

For thousands of years the native Chumash have found practical applications for the abundant deposits of tar balls. Although the smaller fragments we commonly associate with the mayonnaise method are useless, these skilled individuals manipulate the larger deposits in various ways. According to a book written by a UCSB professor, Milton Love, Chumash made canoes and baskets watertight, repaired cracked vessels and roofing, and affixed hooks and arrow points securely to their shafts using this sticky adhesive.

In the late 18th century, as the mission system expanded northward along the coast, explorers took note of the natural abundance of oil seeping from the land.



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Pedro Font, a Spanish explorer, made entries in his journal about the "tar which the sea throws up found on the shores, sticking to the stones," and how its distinct odor was perceptible. He speculated that there might be springs of tar flowing into the sea since the scent grew stronger each day, resembling the smell found on a ship or in a store stocked with tarred ship tackle and rope.

This unique sensory relationship between crude oil and people has touched the consciousness of different people through time. Today, it is particularly intertwined in the experiences of local surfers. Emma Hersh, a devoted longboarder hailing from

Costa Rica and double majoring in Global and Environmental Studies, expressed her perspective. "While I'm surfing, I can see the oil, and I know it's naturally occurring," she said. "But then my gaze shifts to the stunning beach and mountains, and that's when I see the oil rig."

As Hersh explains, "Some people aren't aware of how much of it occurs naturally, so they assume it all comes from the oil rig without connecting that the rig is there for a reason." This tendency to shift blame solely onto offshore drilling, disregarding the natural occurrence of seepage off our coast, does not arise in isolation. It is deeply influenced by the tangible consequences associated with oil drilling in the ocean, whether we acknowledge them or not

Unlike natural seeps, industrial extraction in deep waters comes with a host of environmental risks. Two senior scientists from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, John Ferrington and Judith McDowell, point out that, "Oil seeps are generally old, sometimes ancient, so the marine plants and animals in these ecosystems have had hundreds to thousands of years to adjust and acclimate to the exposure to petroleum chemicals." On the other hand, the production, transportation, and consumption of oil by humans often leads to the introduction of chemicals into new ecosystems. A risk-proof method of drilling and transporting oil from the sea floor does not exist. As

oil companies have sought to drill in increasingly deepwater to access these natural deposits, the likelihood of disaster inevitably rises.

Drawing from a long legacy of attempted offshoring of oil extraction, a slur of new drilling operations were built in the 1960s, with IV's Platform Holly built in 1965. In 1969, just a year after it began to pump oil, a blowout of Platform A released an estimated four million gallons of oil into the Santa Barbara Channel and devastated ecosystems of countless species.

According to the LA Times, the explosion was so powerful that it cracked the seafloor in five places, spewing crude oil at a rate of 1,000 gallons an hour for a month before it was slowed.

Thick waves of midnight black tar washed up onto the beaches of IV, seeping into the crevices of everything in their paths. At its worst, the resulting oil slick was 660 miles in length, roughly the size of the state of California from north to south. Thousands of sea birds and animals died as a result of contamination. Photographs preserved in the archives of the UCSB Library depict the harrowing aftermath of the spill: surfers completely covered in oil, observers gazing upon beaches littered not with rocks but deceased sea lions, and seabirds coated in layers of crude oil.

As a result of the 1969 disaster, UCSB students and local residents created organizations like Get Oil Out! (GOO)

and explored new ways to think about environmental issues, symbolized by the establishment of the Environmental Studies discipline at UCSB. The legacy of activism stemming from the spill of 1969 is also enshrined at the national level, with the origins of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Clean Water Act, and Earth Day owing their creation to the national movement animated by the disaster. Today there is still no fail-safe method of extraction from the seafloor. As we move forward with extraction in any capacity, risk of disaster is an inevitable calculation.

After a long summer on the oily beaches of IV, we understand how much of an inconvenience tar balls can be. The goo, slicks, and bubbles force us to adapt, whether smearing mayonnaise on our feet or scraping oil off our surfboards. Besides just invoking the purist annoyance, these symbols force us to reconcile with the disasters of the past and remind us of the activism that existed before us. Oil is a century-old industry in this area, and activists have campaigned for almost as long to shut down oil extraction because of its detrimental effects on our health and ecosystems. IV's oily connection extends beyond our sensory experiences of tar on our feet and the scent in the air; it encompasses a responsibility to protect our environment and demand a vision for the future underpinned by the activism of the past. ■

