

Health & Science

The ghosts of past spills loom over oil blanketing Santa Barbara's beaches

Environment Science

by **John J. Berger** - May 29, 2015

In the documentary on the BP oil spill, "The Great Invisible," filmmaker Margaret Brown examines our Faustian Bargain with Big Oil.



"Refugio Oil Spill in Santa Barbara" by Zackmann08 - I took the photo.. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons - http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Refugio_Oil_Spill_in_Santa_Barbara.jpg#/media/File:Refugio_Oil_Spill_in_Santa_Barbara.jpg

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SAN DIEGO, May 29, 2015 – Unless the oil industry is virtually in your backyard, it is easy to forget how this powerful global enterprise steadily despoils the land, air and ocean in pursuit of energy and profit.

With thousands of routine oil spills and accidents occurring every year – from oil wells, pipelines, refineries, tankers and oil trains – more oil and chemicals are cumulatively spilled in an average year in routine accidents than in major oil spills.

Citing a recent National Academy of Sciences study, "Oil in the Sea," NOAA estimates that all spills in North American waters total 29 million gallons of petroleum every year, with 85 percent in the form of small releases.

[Ceres Conference focuses on signs of progress in clean energy](#)

That ratio changes, however, for the giant spills, such as the Exxon Valdez disaster of 1989 and the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010. After the Deepwater Horizon oil drilling platform blew up and sank on April 20, 2010, killing 11 oil workers, the Macondo well beneath it gushed for 87 days before it could be capped.

By one government estimate, 210 million gallons of oil poured into the Gulf of Mexico.

The word “disaster” is more appropriate than “spill” for events like the Exxon Valdez accident or the avoidable Macondo well fiasco, to which oil industry cost cutting is known to have contributed. “Spill” connotes a minor mishap. It underplays the long-term damage to wildlife, critical habitat and coastal economies, and the risks to the health of oil spill cleanup workers—100,000 in BP’s case—or to the people who lose their livelihoods or their lives.

As filmmaker Margaret Brown implies in her new documentary on the BP oil spill, “The Great Invisible,” we have made a Faustian bargain with Big Oil. Give us “cheap, unlimited energy.” We will then accept the public health and environmental impacts.

The Great Invisible: The BP Deepwater Horizon Disaster and its invisible legacy

Of course, the energy may not be so cheap if you tally all the damages that the fossil fuel industry causes. A new [study](#) from the International Monetary Fund reported in *Salon* puts the price tag of the direct subsidies the industry receives plus the costs of the uncharged damages it causes at “an astounding \$5.3 trillion in benefits per year.”

Salon also cites a World Health Organization [finding](#) that 3.7 million deaths worldwide every year are related to outdoor air pollution, much of it from burning fossil fuels.

The Faustian bargain comes with a heady list of conditions. We’re not only expected to accept the “routine” oil spills and the toxic fumes from spills and oil refineries and diesel engines, but drillers are also allowed to contaminate aquifers with fracking fluids containing more than 500 toxic chemicals.

As California goes (on energy and climate), so goes the nation?

In our name, the federal government leases millions of acres of public land and water to the fossil fuel industry. The government also provides billions of public tax money in direct subsidies to the industry.

With our tacit consent, the industry legally desecrates millions of acres of forest, range and Arctic wilderness, crisscrossing the lands with pipelines that periodically leak crude oil, and with skeins of roads that fragment natural ecosystems. We watch dolefully as Native American communities lose their traditional lifestyles to make way for oil industry and mining operations.

Then we are surprised when oil spreads across popular fishing grounds, marshes or beaches, as it did last week on the beaches in Santa Barbara, thanks to a ruptured pipeline operated by Plains All American Pipeline.

The pipeline released more than 100,000 gallons of crude, some of which wound up in the ocean. It turns out that this Houston-based multi-billion dollar “master limited partnership,” with a network of nearly 18,000 miles of oil and gas pipelines, also has a badly blemished safety record (see *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 2015, cited below).

Approval to drill in the Chukchi Sea threatens Arctic Seas

Had safety and proper maintenance been a higher priority for the wealthy company and its regulators, maybe California Gov. Jerry Brown would not have had to declare a state of emergency in Santa Barbara County last week.

Just give us this day our daily oil, to fuel our engines and to mold our plastics and to weave the synthetic clothes on our backs. The oil will salve our conscience, even as it powers our economy. Hail, Dr. Faustus.

John J. Berger, Ph.D. is an energy and environmental policy specialist who has produced ten books on climate, energy, and natural resource topics. He is the author of the award-winning [Climate Peril: The Intelligent Reader’s Guide to the Climate Crisis](#) and [Climate Myths: The Campaign Against Climate Science](#).

Further information can be obtained [here](#).

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