

# There Will Be Birds: Images of Oil Disasters in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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Between 1967 and 1977, with a string of marine oil spills, national newspapers and magazines expanded their century-old repertoire of oil disaster images beyond gushers and fires to include photographs of oil-soaked birds and other wildlife, crippled, dying, or dead. These images of oil's wild victims marked something new. They contested older visual narratives of oil as abundant and powerful, the source of American economic and national dominance.<sup>1</sup> The oil-soaked bird or mammal, paired with the oft-seen image of volunteers bathing the animal, suggested a range of new stories. These included oil as a threatening evil and the individual American oil consumer (affluent, white) as guilty, through demand for oil, of victimizing innocents. Those images also created narratives of guilt-ridden consumers as rescuers, seeking salvation from oily sin through efforts to save the helpless. Finally, through these images, stories were able to project the fate of oil-soaked birds and mammals onto oil consumers: wounded, powerless victims of technology and oil dependence. "Not only was it man's fault that they suffered," a 1977 *Boston Globe* editorial stated of rescued auks and loons, "but we can look at their sad plight and see in it our own fate." Just as Paul Thomas Anderson's 2007 film of California oil business, *There Will Be Blood*, made murder the inevitable product of oil wealth, so too, by the late 1970s, had media images of oil disasters settled on a single trope.<sup>2</sup>

Americans' new oil stories reflected key historical developments of the post-World War II era: a broad shift in middle-class values from the primacy of industrial growth and economic gain to a focus on consumption of environmental amenities at home and at play, including fresh air, clean water, and open space in local, state, and national parks; the resulting rise of modern middle-class environmentalism, characterized by widespread concern about pollution as a threat to human health, wildlife populations, and residential

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<sup>1</sup> The visual history of oil includes more than disasters, including production landscapes and technologies; corporate logos and advertisements; and charts and graphs of supplies and prices. The 1973–1974 embargo by Arab oil-producing countries prompted cartoonists to portray oil as foreign through problematic images of Arab producers. All such visual constructions deserve further analysis.

<sup>2</sup> This argument draws from Finis Dunaway, "Gas Masks, Pogo, and the Ecological Indian: Earth Day and the Visual Politics of American Environmentalism," *American Quarterly*, 60 (March 2008), 67–99, esp. 94–95. Research here is based on a survey of images in national print media, including *Harper's*, *Century*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Boston Globe*. "The Argo Survivors," editorial, *Boston Globe*, Jan. 26, 1977, p. 26. *There Will Be Blood*, dir. Paul Thomas Anderson (Paramount, 2007).

and recreational environments; and the oil embargo of 1973–1974 by Arab oil exporters and the resulting energy crisis, which intensified American anxiety over oil supplies, prices, sources, and consumption. Print media images of oil disasters cannot fully explain the intersections among these historical changes, but the shift in imagery in the 1960s and 1970s suggests that these events deserve further attention. This transformation in visual narratives also provides historical context for the media coverage of the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster in 2010. To paraphrase the historian Martha Sandweiss: images cannot fully explain the past; they can, however, describe it in new ways and draw attention to and forge connections among events often forgotten.<sup>3</sup>

### Gushers

The first gushers or “flowing wells” burst from the earth near Pennsylvania’s Oil Creek in the spring of 1861. From the 1880s into the 1920s, newspaper and magazine portrayals of gushers captured oil’s serendipitous abundance, power, and naturalness. Reporters described both the exhilaration of nature beyond human control and nature’s providence in granting Americans such vast energy and wealth. Americans often saw petroleum safely within tanks, cars, and pipelines; they saw the liquid itself only when it escaped containment, gushing, exploding, and spilling. Uncontained, oil became not only visually spectacular but also subject to a range of cultural meanings, including naturalness and vastness. California journalists used the metaphor of a volcano to describe the Lakeview gusher, which spewed for eighteen months between March 1910 and September 1911. (See [figure 1](#).) The *Los Angeles Times* reported of its “volcanic glory”: “from the very first, the gusher was beyond control.”<sup>4</sup>

Most visual records of gushers included measurements: how long the oil gushed, its greatest height, and the daily and total volume of oil spewing forth. From the “gigantic spouter” of the 1874 Lady Hunter in Butler County, Pennsylvania (100 feet high, 3,000 barrels the first day), to the Lucas geyser at Spindletop, Texas, in 1901 (40 feet high, 30,000 barrels per day) to Lakeview (300 feet high, 50,000 barrels per day), gushers represented bigness, energy, and wealth in dramatic visual form. The oceanic pools beneath gushers proved a photographic spectacle as well. A front-page *Los Angeles Times* photograph of the Lakeview pool captured the entire landscape reflected in the mirror of the oil’s surface, a dark sea held by earthen berms.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On shifting values and environmentalism, see Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (New York, 1987), 1–39. “The seeming ordinariness of photographic evidence . . . seems to imply its value as a record of daily life. But photographs cannot explicate complex events . . . Photographs can describe the past; they have a limited capacity, however, to explain it.” Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven, 2004), 327. Emphasis in original.

<sup>4</sup> Harold F. Williamson and Arnold R. Daum, *The American Petroleum Industry: The Age of Illumination, 1859–1899* (Evanston, 1959), 111–13; “Petroleum Gushers,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 26, 1882, p. 5; E. V. Smalley, “Striking Oil,” *Century Magazine*, 26 (July 1883), 329; “An Oil Volcano,” *New York Times*, July 11, 1887, p. 5. See also Brian Frehner, *Finding Oil: The Nature of Petroleum Geology, 1859–1920* (Lincoln, 2011), 1–2. “The Last Gush of the Celebrated Lakeview Spouter,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 12, 1911, p. II-3.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Robbins, “Lady Hunter Well, Flowing 100 feet high,” ca. 1880, 1 photographic print on stereo card, LC-DIG-stereo-1s01744 (front), LC-DIG-stereo-2s01744 (back) (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008678994/>. Other examples include J. J. Watson, “American Petroleum,” ca. 1864, music cover showing the Tarr Farm, Oil Creek, Pennsylvania, LC-USZ62-86463, *ibid.*, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001702308/>; and “Shooting a Well,” wood engraving, in Smalley, “Striking Oil,” 329, *Making of America*, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu/m/maol/>. On the Lucas geyser, see Fred J. Haskin, “Wonderful Oil Fields of Texas,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 17, 1901, p. A3. “California’s Most Wonderful Oil Picture—The Lakeview Gusher and Its Great Lake of Oil,” photograph, *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 1910, p. 1.



Figure 1. "The Lake View property & 25 Hill, Kern County, California, c. 1910." *Courtesy Panoramic Photographs Collection, Library of Congress, PAN US GEOG, California No. 315.*

Photographs and engravings of gushers also featured awestruck spectators; hundreds flocked to these scenes, either transfixed by the earth's power or jubilant in newfound wealth. The *Atlanta Constitution* reporter Fred Haskin noted of the Lucas geyser at Spindletop that "The railroads did a flourishing business in hauling spectators" and that five thousand people crowded the scene the Sunday after the blowout. The *Los Angeles Times* offered country excursions for homeseekers that featured a stop at the Lakeview gusher to view its flowing wealth and million-barrel reservoir. The members of the San Francisco Stock Exchange visited in 1910; in a panoramic photograph the group framed the gushing well. To pose with an oil gusher was to embrace a limitless future.<sup>6</sup>

## Fires

Land gushers faded from view in the 1920s, when blowout preventers brought them (sometimes) under control. No such innovation could prevent fire. In newspapers across the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, pictures of explosions and fires were even more common than those of gushers. Images of billowing black smoke shared with gushers the spectacle of power beyond human control. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported of a 1912 Spindletop fire, "no power on earth could stop the fury of the flames." While oil fires claimed human victims—captions usually mentioned injuries and deaths—few newspaper photographs showed any visual evidence of human loss. Instead, images of oil fires spoke consistently to the power and even the beauty of oil. At Cherry Grove, Pennsylvania, in 1883, a *Century Magazine* writer found a burning well "probably the most beautiful sight ever witnessed in the oil regions . . . the blazing fluid, spouting up high in the air and breaking in a shower of fiery drops." It burned for four days, "a wonderful fountain of fire in the midst of the forest." The stereograph memorializing the 1875 Oil City fire, also in northwestern Pennsylvania, portrayed its "awful grandeur": "The dense black smoke which rolled from it, towering aloft into the air and darkening the country for miles, the glare of the flame, the frequent explosions, the jets and bursts of fiery spray, and the intense heat distinctly felt

<sup>6</sup> Haskin, "Wonderful Oil Fields of Texas," A3. "The Times' Homeseekers' Excursion," advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 1910, p. V24. "Visit of San Francisco Stock Exchange to the Famous Lake View Gusher," ca. 1910, photographic print, LC-USZ62-62774 (Prints and Photographs Division), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007661699/>.

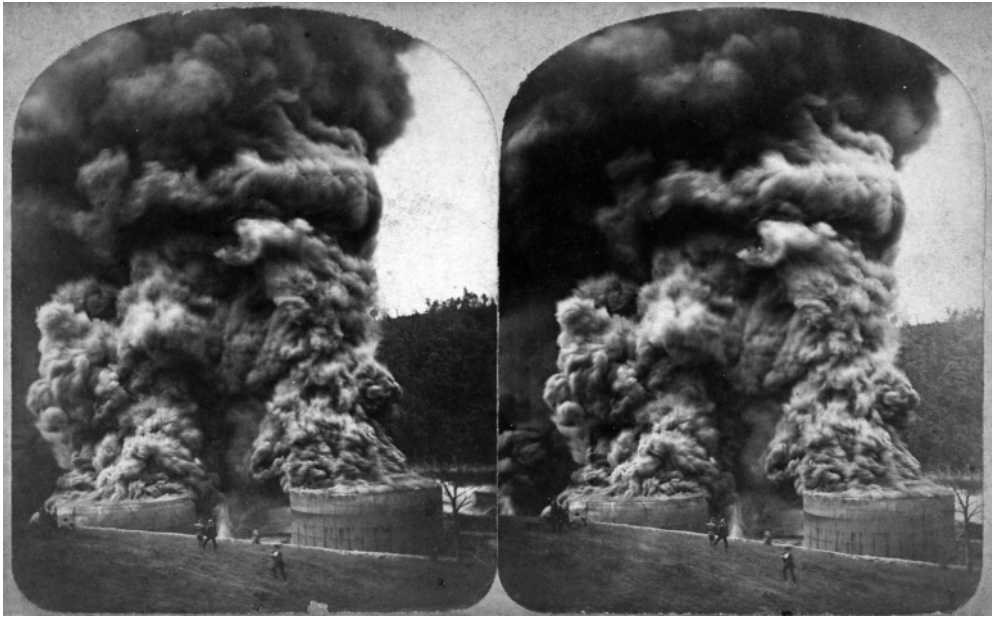


Figure 2. This stereograph, “Burning of the Imperial Refinery,” shows an Oil City, Pennsylvania, fire in 1875. The description on the back of the photograph reads, in part, “In this view are represented two tanks of about 12000 bbls capacity each, a few moments after their ignition.” *Courtesy Library of Congress, LC-DIG-stereo-1s01745.*

several miles from the spot render it unsurpassable in the history of the oil country.” (See [figure 2](#).)<sup>7</sup>

As they had with gushers, publications focused on scale. In 1900 a photographer called a conflagration at Bayonne, New Jersey, “the great fifteen day fire of the standard oil company’s tanks.” *Time* described a 1938 tank fire at Linden, New Jersey, as a “flaming geyser of 1,680,000 gallons of gasoline.” Captions often cast an eye toward the superlative. A writer claimed that a 1913 incident at Mooringsport, Louisiana, stood as the “largest single well fire in history of the U.S. of A.” The *Los Angeles Times* pictured “two of the worst oil blazes in history” at Brea and San Luis Obispo, California, in 1926.<sup>8</sup>

## Spills

During and after World War II, the forms and causes of American oil disasters expanded. Oil out of control increasingly meant oil at sea. Wartime ships and submarines in the

<sup>7</sup> Justin Gillis, “The Era of the Oil Gusher,” June 21, 2010, online posting, “Green: A Blog about Energy and the Environment,” *New York Times*, <http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/21/the-era-of-the-oil-gusher/?emc=eta1>. “Beaumont Blazing, Oil Field Afire in All Directions,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 12, 1902, p. 1. Smalley, “Striking Oil,” 332. Frank Robbins, “Burning of the Imperial Refinery,” 1875, photographic print on stereo card, LC-DIG-stereo-1s01745 (front), LC-DIG-stereo-2s01745 (back) (Prints and Photographs Division), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008678995/>.

<sup>8</sup> “The Great Fifteen Day Fire of the Standard Oil Company’s Tanks,” 1900, stereoscopic print, Keystone-Mast Collection (UCR/California Museum of Photography, University of California at Riverside), <http://www.cmp.ucr.edu/mainframe/collections/guides/kmast/>. “Crude Cuts,” *Time*, Oct. 24, 1938, p. 62. “Hugh Oil Gusher at Mooringsport, La. A Monstrous Column of Roaring Flame, Star Oil Co. Loucke No. 3, on Fire since Aug. 7, 1913,” photographic print, LC-USZ62-119264 (Prints and Photographs Division), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97514401/>. “Clouds of Smoke and Flame Roll Skyward in the Second Great Union Conflagration,” photograph, *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 10, 1926, p. 2; “Two of the Worst Oil Blazes in History Are Raging in California,” *ibid.*, 8.

Atlantic Ocean sent oil slicks onto East Coast beaches. With increased postwar production from offshore rigs, blowouts and gushers moved underwater; with shipments from the Persian Gulf, tankers wrecked at sea, often on approach to shoal-filled harbors. Abundant oil imports fueled American prosperity, but that affluence drove social and cultural changes—including environmentalism—that in turn brought new meanings for oil itself, especially when it escaped human control. Bigness, power, and abundance remained part of the media narrative, but images expanded to include oil-slicked bays and harbors, soiled beaches, and, above all, birds, ducks, turtles, seals, and otters imperiled by oil.<sup>9</sup>

The historian Samuel P. Hays roots postwar environmentalism in a shift among members of the American middle and upper classes from being concerned about efficient use of natural resources in support of economic growth to having an increasing desire for high-quality outdoor experiences, as defined by clean air and water, and recreational and residential contact with beautiful landscapes and seascapes. New values concerning the aesthetic quality of American life and leisure emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as incomes rose and millions of white Americans moved to the suburbs and embraced outdoor recreation. The scholar Karl Brooks writes, with subtle reference to oil, that in those years “widespread prosperity gushed across the landscape, floating millions toward a level of material security previously known only to a relative handful of the wealthy.” Concern for environmental “beauty, health, and permanence,” as Hays puts it, followed clear demographic patterns; younger, more educated white Americans living on the East and West Coasts, in the upper Midwest, and in Florida made environmental amenities central to their understanding of a good life. With increased fears of air and water pollution came a growing anticorporate sentiment. Thus the oil spills of 1967–1977 for the most part washed up on the shores of those Americans most likely to experience them as a direct assault on the values most central to their lives and identities, and on their visions of the future.<sup>10</sup>

In her landmark 1962 book *Silent Spring*, the biologist Rachel Carson had already alerted Americans to the ecological and health threats of DDT and other pesticides, using birds as her central symbol for “man’s assaults upon” and “universal contamination of the environment.” Carson wrote for an audience awakening to a new sense of environmental privilege connected to outdoor leisure and aesthetic pleasure. “To the bird watcher, the suburbanite who derives joy from birds,” she wrote, “anything that destroys the wildlife

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York, 1991), 429, 492, 542, 556–57; Tyler Priest, *The Offshore Imperative: Shell Oil’s Search for Petroleum in Postwar America* (College Station, 2007), 29–136; Congress of the United States, Office of Technology Assessment, *Oil Transportation by Tankers: An Analysis of Marine Pollution and Safety Measures* (Washington, 1975), 8–14, <http://www.fas.org/ota/reports/7508.pdf>; United States, National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, *The History of Offshore Oil and Gas in the United States* (Washington, 2011), 3–17, <http://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo8607>; “9 of 10 Biggest Oil Spills Have Involved Tankers,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1979, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, 3–5, 34, 38, esp. 3–4. Karl Boyd Brooks, *Before Earth Day: The Origins of American Environmental Law, 1945–1970* (Lawrence, 2009), 94. In 1971 a Harvard University sociologist wrote of the public feeling “that corporate performance has made the society uglier, dirtier, trashier, more polluted and noxious.” Daniel Bell, “The Corporation and Society in the 1970s,” *Public Interest*, 24 (Sept. 1971), 7. Word limits prevent analysis of the 1979 Ixtoc oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Coverage fit the general pattern asserted here, but spills in the Gulf stand somewhat apart given socioeconomic differences between Texas and Louisiana and more affluent coastal areas. On this spill, see William K. Stevens, “Texas Surviving Worst Oil Spill, but Experts Say Harm May Not Be Known for Years,” *New York Times*, Aug. 11, 1979, p. 6; “Texas: The Oil Spill Is Coming,” *Newsweek*, Aug. 13, 1979, pp. 24, 27; “Pancakes and Mousse off Texas: A Giant Oil Spill Menaces the Beaches,” *Time*, Aug. 20, 1979, p. 23; and “When a Giant Oil Slick Hits U.S. Shores,” *U.S. News and World Report*, Aug. 20, 1979, pp. 50–51. For reflections on the Ixtoc spill in light of the *Deepwater Horizon* spill, see Lisa Gray, “Dispatches from a Disaster,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 20, 2010, p. A1.

of an area for even a single year has deprived him of pleasure to which he has a legitimate right.” Thanks to Carson, interested Americans spent the mid-1960s learning in great detail of the threats pesticides posed to robins, bald eagles, and peregrine falcons. Starting in 1967 media coverage of oil spills brought more injured and dead birds into the public eye.<sup>11</sup>

Though images of oiled waterfowl sporadically appeared in newspapers from the 1950s on, the grounding of the American oil tanker *Torrey Canyon* off the British coast on March 18, 1967, sparked the first widespread American newspaper reports of oiled wildlife and volunteer rescue efforts, including a handful of images of imperiled birds. When slicks from undetermined sources oiled hundreds of birds off the New Jersey and Massachusetts shores just weeks after the British spill, more and more images from both sides of Atlantic cropped up, as American reporters connected the two stories. News of wildlife losses prompted warnings of apocalypse. The *New York Times* noted that even in peaceful Cornwall, England, “there is no escape from the destructiveness of our industrial society.” The *Washington Post* decried, with a bird metaphor, “the systematic fouling of our nest.” In June a *New York Times Sunday Magazine* spread echoed Carson’s earlier work, *The Sea around Us*, with its title, “The Oil around Us.” The story included a picture of an imperiled puffin and stated that “petroleum has become a devil in our civilization . . . creating a survival issue both for sea life and for man himself.” Such rhetoric echoed Carson’s linkage of overuse of pesticides with nuclear annihilation. “The question,” Carson had written, “is whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself.”<sup>12</sup>

Spills at Santa Barbara, Tampa Bay, and San Francisco in 1969–1971 catapulted such concerns, and images of oil-damaged wildlife, to new heights of media visibility. In January and February 1969 an eleven-day blowout on a Union Oil Company rig off the southern California coast sent waves of oil onto Santa Barbara beaches. The *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, and *Time* ran photographs of the rig, the slick, the makeshift oil booms, the beaches, and volunteers and workers bathing oily grebes (diving birds that spend almost all of their time in water). *Newsweek* included a dying cormorant (a coastal seabird), along with workers raking up oil-absorbent straw. *Life* published images of two grebes, one dead, one being bathed. Reports and images emphasized a sense of tragic, heartbreaking helplessness. Volunteers watched, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, as cormorants “tried vainly to clean one another off with their beaks,” and then

<sup>11</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962; Boston, 1994), 6, 86. See Thomas R. Dunlap, *DDT: Scientists, Citizens, and Public Policy* (Princeton, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> For the earliest found newspaper image of an oiled duck, see “Drake Dead, Hen Dying,” photograph, *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 14, 1957, p. D2. On burgeoning awareness of East Coast oil spills as news of the *Torrey Canyon* spread, see “Oil Calamity Isn’t the First in State; Five Others Noted,” *Boston Globe*, April 17, 1967, p. 3. On *Torrey Canyon*, see “Britain: All Hands Fight Sticky Invasion,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1967, p. K4; “Crack of Doom for Tanker,” photograph, *ibid.*, March 28, 1967, p. 2; and Granville Watts, “Ship Gushing Oil, British Struggle to Save Beaches,” *Boston Globe*, March 20, 1967, p. 1. The *Christian Science Monitor* ran an illustrated story of British bird-rescue efforts as the American oil stories broke. See John Parrott, “The Oil Ordeal,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 18, 1967, p. 9. For other coverage, see “Congealed Oil Ruins Cornish Coastline,” *Washington Post*, April 4, 1967, p. A20; “Birds, Fish Victims of Black Tide,” *Boston Globe*, April 17, 1967, p. 3; “200 French Boats Are Mobilized to Fight Torrey Canyon Oil Slick,” *New York Times*, April 14, 1967, p. 8; “Cape Cod Beaches Hit by an Oil Slick,” *ibid.*, April 17, 1967, p. 32; and “Death by Oil,” editorial, *ibid.*, April 21, 1967, p. 38. “Threat from the Sea: Britain’s Battle of the Oil,” *ibid.*, April 2, 1967, p. 170. “Fouling the Nest,” editorial, *Washington Post*, March 31, 1967, p. A20. Rachel Carson, *The Sea around Us* (New York, 1951); Robert Rienow and Leona Train Rienow, “The Oil around Us,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, June 4, 1967, p. SM13. Carson, *Silent Spring*, 99.

died from ingested oil. Fleeing well-intentioned rescuers, birds headed into the surf. "Falling into the black liquid," the report read, "they lay in the ooze, crying weakly." In June *Life* covered the spill's effects with photographs from San Miguel Island off the coast. Pictures included an oil-drenched seal pup stranded in slippery rocks. The island, the reporter wrote, provided "the black vision of the dead world which may come."<sup>13</sup>

Those images both reflected and drove public anger at the spill, Union Oil, and lax government regulation of offshore drilling. Quotations from Union Oil president Fred Hartley worsened public reaction to wildlife losses and the ruination of sand beaches crucial to Santa Barbara's tourism economy. The *New York Times* truncated Hartley's statement before the U.S. Senate as: "I'm amazed at the publicity for the loss of a few birds." The *Boston Globe* provided a more complete quotation, which did little to improve public sentiment: "I'm always impressed by the publicity the death of birds receives compared with that of people." "Relative to death that occurs from crime in our cities, the desecration of the offshore area of Santa Barbara—although it's important and a problem we are fully devoted to—should be given a little perspective," he argued.<sup>14</sup>

Politicians responded with somewhat greater skill. After surveying the Santa Barbara shore in March 1969, Richard M. Nixon called for "material progress not at the cost of the destruction of all those things of beauty without which all the material progress is meaningless." Less than two years later the nation had an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In October 1972 Nixon signed, at one sitting, the Marine Protection, Research, and Sanctuaries Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and the Coastal Zone Management Act. That same year also brought the Clean Water Act, and in 1973 Congress passed the Endangered Species Act.<sup>15</sup>

Government officials could barely keep ahead of the oil disasters, however, or of pictures of oil's avian victims. Within weeks of the EPA's creation, the tanker *Delian Apollon* dumped oil into Tampa Bay. Images in *Life* included the photographer George Silk's stunning portrait of a drowned bluebill duck. (See [figure 3](#).) In the same month, a slick with no clear origin killed several hundred birds off Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts;

<sup>13</sup> "An Oil 'Tide,'" photograph, *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 30, 1969, p. B1; Eric Malnic, "Sea Birds Killed by Oil Slick; Fight to Seal Well Leak Speeded," *ibid.*, Feb. 1, 1969, p. 1; Harry Trimborn, "Battle Shaping Up over Offshore Oil," *ibid.*, Feb. 2, 1969, p. 1; Dial Torgerson and Leonard Greenwood, "Oil Slick Damage, Bird Deaths Soar," *ibid.*, Feb. 6, 1969, p. A1; Leonard Greenwood and Eric Malnic, "Oil Seepage May Be under Control," *ibid.*, Feb. 8, 1969, p. 1; Harry Trimborn and Leonard Greenwood, "Oil Flow Plugged; Big Cleanup Starts," *ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1969, p. 1; "Oil Slick Spreads, but Leak Slows," *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 1969, p. 32; Gladwin Hill, "Slick off California Coast Revives Oil Deal Disputes," *ibid.*, Feb. 2, 1969, p. 1; Bob Rose, "It Ruins Beaches, Smothers Lives," *Boston Globe*, Feb. 9, 1969, p. 13; "Seabirds Killed by Oil," *Washington Post*, Feb. 1, 1969, p. A6; Spencer Rich and George Lardner, "Hickel Shuts Down Oil Operations in Leak Area," *ibid.*, Feb. 8, 1969, p. 1; "Bird Cleanings," photograph, *ibid.*, Feb. 12, 1969, p. A7; "Befouled Grebe Gets a Bath," photograph, *Time*, Feb. 14, 1969, p. 25. "The Great Blob," *Newsweek*, Feb. 17, 1969, pp. 31–32. "A California Oil Strike Nobody Wanted," *Life*, Feb. 14, 1969, pp. 30–31. Dial Torgerson and Leonard Greenwood, "Drifting Oil Smears Beaches for 12 Miles; Scum-Mired Birds Dying by Hundreds," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 6, 1969, pp. 1, 3. David Snell, "Iridescent Gift of Death," *Life*, June 13, 1969, pp. 23–27, esp. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Warren Weaver Jr., "Senate Hearing Held," *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 1969, p. 19. Rose, "It Ruins Beaches, Smothers Lives," 13.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Nixon, "Remarks Following Inspection of Oil Damage at Santa Barbara Beach," March 21, 1969, *The American Presidency Project*, by John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=1967>; J. Brooks Flippin, *Nixon and the Environment* (Albuquerque, 2000), 25–28, 48–50, 178–80; Richard Nixon, "Statement about Decision to Sign 37 Bills," Oct. 28, 1972, *American Presidency Project*, by Woolley and Peters, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=3662>. Clean Water Act, 33 U.S.C. 1251 et seq. (1972); Endangered Species Act, 16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq. (1973).



Figure 3. This photograph shows a dead bluebill duck lying on its side, eyes open, in an oil spill from the tanker *Delian Apollon*, in Tampa Bay, Florida, on January 1, 1970. Published in *Life*, March 1970. Courtesy George Silk/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

the *Washington Post* featured a front-page photograph of their carcasses. In December 1970 *National Geographic* used an oil-soaked grebe from Santa Barbara on the cover of its special issue “Our Ecological Crisis.” And in January 1971 two tankers collided and ruptured in the fog in San Francisco Bay, bringing flocks of volunteers to beaches and rescue centers to spread hay and scrub birds. The *Los Angeles Times* captured those images, as did *Life*. George Silk, again for *Life*, provided photographs, along with descriptions of loons and grebes as they tried to swim ashore. “It was heartrending to watch their struggle. Finally they were headless blobs floating on the water. Gone were the proud curving necks and the perky heads.” The writer and activist John Francis witnessed the 1971 spill and later wrote of desperate moments at Bolinas Lagoon. “Kneeling in the sand,” he wrote, “a grown man cries as a blackened grebe dies in his hands.”<sup>16</sup>

Amid, and partly due to, the oil-spill carnage, millions of Americans took to streets and classrooms on Earth Day, April 22, 1970, to demonstrate their mounting concerns about air and water pollution. In a perceptive analysis of the visual politics of environmentalism, Finis Dunaway notes three images common in the spring of 1970: people wearing gas masks, Walt Kelly’s comic strip character Pogo, and the ecological Indian of Keep America Beautiful’s antilittering advertisements. All three, he argues, sent the message that American consumers, constructed as affluent and white, bore the greatest risks from, and primary responsibility for, environmental degradation. An Earth Day poster of

<sup>16</sup> “The Dirty Dilemma of Oil Spills,” *Life*, March 6, 1970, pp. 30–31. See also “Oil Rescue,” photograph, *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 17, 1970, p. A1. “Deadly Slicks,” photograph, *Washington Post*, Feb. 10, 1970, p. 1. Gordon Young, James P. Blair, and Bruce Dale, “Our Ecological Crisis,” *National Geographic*, 138 (Dec. 1970), cover, 754–55. Philip Hager, “Volunteers Join Effort to Clean Up Spilled Oil,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 20, 1971, p. A3; George Silk, “More Oil for Our Troubled Waters,” *Life*, Feb. 5, 1971, pp. 36–43, esp. 40. John Francis, *Planetwalker: 22 Years of Walking. 17 Years of Silence* (Washington, 2008), 13–14. In protest, John Francis later took a seventeen-year vow of silence and traveled the globe by foot and sail.



Pogo picking up trash declared his famous motto: “We have met the enemy and he is us.” By 1971 the visual narratives of oil-soaked birds rescued by altruistic volunteers had joined these other images in their stories of individual risk and responsibility. Oil spills and antilittering campaigns inspired Americans to bathe oily birds, pick up litter, and save themselves and their world.<sup>17</sup>

That feeling of individual empowerment faded somewhat as the 1970s progressed. Oil gained even greater national news prominence with the Arab oil embargo of 1973–1974, which brought high heating oil prices, long lines at gas pumps, and a growing sense of anxiety and powerlessness. The embargo, the historian Karen R. Merrill writes, “directly challenged U.S. power by hitting the nation in its weakest spot: its increasing reliance on imported oil.”<sup>18</sup> Energy prices remained high into the late 1970s. Another series of spills in 1976–1977 brought oil-soaked birds once more into view; visual narratives of consumer guilt and individual salvation continued, this time with even greater emphasis on helpless victims—both real and symbolic—trapped by oil.

On December 15, 1976, the tanker *Argo Merchant* foundered off of Nantucket Island, Massachusetts, and 7.5 million gallons of oil began a threatening journey toward the Georges Bank fishery to the east. Given the drama of the ship’s grounding, the majority of early newspaper images showed the stranded tanker itself, including repeated front-page photographs in the *Boston Globe* and *New York Times*. Other front-page images included a National Aeronautics and Space Administration photograph of the slick flowing from the wounded ship, taken from five thousand feet up. Two days before Christmas, the *Christian Science Monitor* ran a Guernsey LePelley editorial cartoon showing not a bird but the entire globe, anthropomorphized with arms, hands, and a stricken face, drowning in a black sea labeled “Irresponsible Oil Pollution.” Nine other tanker incidents followed within days or weeks. On December 17 a tanker exploded in Los Angeles Harbor. On December 24 the *Oswego Peace* leaked seven thousand gallons into the Thames River in Connecticut. On December 27 the *Olympic Games* ran aground in the Delaware River near Philadelphia. The outgoing president Gerald R. Ford lamented energy dependence and vulnerability in a January 7, 1977, special message to Congress on oil and energy, just after the tanker *Grand Zenith* disappeared south of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, with thirty-eight Taiwanese crewmen and 8 million gallons of oil. Three weeks later, a heating-oil barge ran aground in Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Adam Rome, “The Genius of Earth Day,” *Environmental History*, 15 (April 2010), 194–95; Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment*, 1–3, 8–10; Dunaway, “Gas Masks, Pogo, and the Ecological Indian,” 67–70, 79. Keep America Beautiful produced the 1971 “crying Indian” television public service announcement, with the line “People start pollution. People can stop it.” To view it, see “An Earth Day Flashback: The ‘Crying Indian’ Commercial,” April 22, 2009, *Encyclopaedia Britannica Blog*, <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2009/04/an-earth-day-flashback-the-keep-america-beautiful-campaign/>. See also Dunaway, “Gas Masks, Pogo, and the Ecological Indian,” 84–89. For a similar argument regarding the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, see Susan Kollin, *Nature’s State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier* (Chapel Hill, 2001), 18–19.

<sup>18</sup> Karen R. Merrill, *The Oil Crisis of 1973–1974: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 2007), 113.

<sup>19</sup> “Oil Spreads across Sea,” photograph, *Boston Globe*, Dec. 24, 1976, p. 1. Guernsey LePelley, “Before We Run Out of Oil We May Run Out of Earth,” cartoon, *Christian Science Monitor*, Dec. 23, 1976, p. 28. “Choppy Seas Searched for Tanker Survivors,” *Boston Globe*, Jan. 9, 1977, p. 34; “Oil Tanker Mishaps since Dec. 15,” *ibid.*, Jan. 30, 1977, p. 16. Gerald Ford, “Special Message to the Congress on Energy,” Jan. 7, 1977, *American Presidency Project*, by Wolley and Peters, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=5542>; Bernard Hoyland, “Coast Guard Sure Tanker Has Sunk,” *Boston Globe*, Jan. 7, 1977, p. 2; Paul Langer, “Oil Spills,” *ibid.*, Feb. 22, 1977, p. 3; Dan Levin, “Troubled by Oiled Waters,” *Sports Illustrated*, Jan. 10, 1977, pp. 96–97; John Kifner, “Tanker Losses Set Record in ’76 Period,” *New York Times*, Jan. 10, 1977, p. 1.



Figure 4. Mammal rescue center volunteers wash an oil-soaked sea otter in Valdez, Alaska, on March 31, 1989, a week after the *Exxon Valdez* oil tanker spill began. *Courtesy Chris Wilkins/AFP/Getty Images.*

The week of January 10, 1977, brought oil images in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Sports Illustrated*; *Time* and *Sports Illustrated* ran photos of a goose and a loon, respectively. *Newsweek* focused on the *Argo Merchant* slick, which, viewed from a spotter plane, “glittered evilly, like an enormous stain of phosphorescent glue.” The *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Tribune* published images of birds or rescue volunteers; the *Boston Globe* ran a picture of a ten-year-old Nantucket boy with a recovering bird. Moments of emotional appeal and projection continued. As a *Sports Illustrated* reporter observed of a stranded murre on Nantucket, “if any bird ever wore a facial expression, this one did. It was one of bewilderment.” In a further bid for individual action in the face of trouble, Jimmy Carter, one day after his inauguration as president, called on Americans to turn down their thermostats.<sup>20</sup>

Twelve years later, on April 1, 1989, a week after the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground in Prince William Sound, Alaska, the *New York Times* ran a photograph, dead center on the front page, of a bird soaked in oil, wrapped in a blanket, awaiting treatment at a rescue center. Most coverage followed the 1970s script, with images of heroic volunteers scrubbing birds and otters. (See figure 4.) The communications scholars Patrick Daley and Dan O’Neill note that both local and national papers used images of birds and otters as symbols of the disaster, “pathetic victims” who evoked sympathy and provided visual stand-ins for the humans threatened by loss. Stories featuring Alaskan townspeople and fishermen framed them as victims as well, expressing “futility about forces beyond their control.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> “Oil Is Pouring on Troubled Waters,” *Time*, Jan. 10, 1977, pp. 44–47; “A Blaze of Anger over Oil Spills,” *U.S. News and World Report*, Jan. 10, 1977, p. 52; Peter Gwynne, Richard Manning, and Jeff B. Copeland, “The Worst Oil Spill?,” *Newsweek*, Jan. 10, 1977, pp. 74–75. Levin, “Troubled by Oiled Waters,” 96–97. Peter Mancusi, Paul Langer, and Fletcher Roberts, “5.5 Million Gallons of Oil Spill into Sea,” *Boston Globe*, Dec. 22, 1976, pp. 1, 6; “Oil-Spill Victim,” photograph, *Washington Post*, Dec. 30, 1976, p.1; “A Murre Auk,” photograph, *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 24, 1976, p. 2. Jimmy Carter, “The Energy Shortage Statement Announcing Initiatives to Deal with the Shortage,” Jan. 21, 1977, *American Presidency Project*, by Wolley and Peters, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7477>.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Egan, “Alaska’s Stain: Delicate Balance Undone,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1989, p. A1. Patrick Daley, “‘Sad Is Too Mild a Word’: Press Coverage of the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill,” *Journal of Communication*, 41 (Aug. 1991), 46, 45.

Did the script hold in 2010 for coverage of the *Deepwater Horizon* blowout, fire, and spill in the Gulf of Mexico? Though oil-soaked birds and turtles made the news, the central narratives and the news production technology of the 2010 disaster were noticeably expanded beyond the 1970s and 1980s template. Drawing on older traditions, coverage focused on the explosion and the burning rig, even long after the fire was out. The oil gusher returned as well, this time on live underwater film of the spewing well; efforts to cap the flow became the dominant media narrative. Stories also broadened out to fully recognize the human costs of the disaster, not only for rig workers and their families but also for fishers, shrimpers, restaurant owners, and other tourist-dependent business owners. They appeared in images as individuals with names and voices, not as powerless victims but as citizens demanding recourse.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the World Wide Web allowed national newspapers and magazines, as well as television news agencies, to post slide shows with hundreds of images.<sup>23</sup> Viewers could thus choose among visual narratives, tracking images of local residents and workers, grieving families, cleanup crews, wildlife scientists, rescue agencies, islands, beaches, wetland ecosystems, and, of course, pelicans, herons, and turtles. This diverse range of visual narratives suggests that concern for the health of marine environments has shifted in promising ways to include a broader swath of Americans, all of whom care for and depend on the sea and what it provides, and all of whom demand protection for ways of life—human and wild—threatened by ever-gushing, exploding, and spilling oil. Americans may continue to see themselves reflected in images of oil-soaked wildlife, as powerless victims of their own dependence, but they may also recognize, in this new century, that there are other stories to tell.

<sup>22</sup> For a particularly widespread image, see Gerald Herbert's May 23, 2010, photograph of a dying heron at Barataria Bay, "Wildlife Suffer as Oil Spill Spreads," July 27, 2010, *NewsHour*, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/multimedia/oilwildlife/?photos>. Brian Black, "On BP's Deepwater Horizon Live Video Feed," *Environmental History*, 15 (Oct. 2010), 741–45; Peter Galison and Caroline A. Jones, "Unknown Quantities: Peter Galison and Caroline A. Jones on Oil Spill Imaging," *ArtForum International* (Nov. 2010), 49–51.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, *NewsHour*, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour>.