Rising Tide: The Santa Barbara Oil Spill and its Aftermath
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Abstract:

The U.S. environmental movement expanded in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the passage of landmark laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act and the creation of Earth Day. Environmental historians point to Earth Day and to a lesser extent to the Santa Barbara Oil Spill of 1969 as important events in the growth of the movement, but the specific effects of the spill are not well understood. The dissertation explores how the consequences of the spill contributed to rapid shifts in federal environmental policy in both the legislative and executive branches. Moreover, the dissertation examines how the spill shaped oil industry policy and new environmental technologies and shows that in the wake of environmental catastrophe, changes occurred in environmental policy and regulation that continue to make themselves felt today. The transformations took place in three specific elements of the environmental movement. First, a swift and powerful reaction by three pivotal Democratic Senators combined with the slow response of the newly inaugurated Nixon Administration, allowed the federal government to take the lead over state governments in the development of environmental policy. Strong federal leadership and advocacy of federalist views promoted the passage of NEPA, the Clean Water Act amendments, and the creation of Earth Day. Second, as oil from the spill continued to coat the beaches, water fowl and marine mammals in Santa Barbara County, the American public clearly saw the oil industry's inability to develop and implement methods to contain and remove the oil. Wanting to protect itself from further negative exposure, the oil industry experienced its own form of greening, with a new emphasis on spill prevention. Third, the rise of technologies to test for the presence of environmental contaminants, such as gas chromatography, coincided with the spill and led to scientific clashes over definitions of contamination. Incommensurable views of contamination emerged from the methodological commitments of the sciences themselves, particularly within biology and environmental chemistry. Once the scientific debates became public, the resurgent environmental movement contributed to these clashes, even shaping the direction of the science itself.