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Silent Spill: The Organization of an Industrial Crisis, by Thomas D. Beamish

Carol M. Parker

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tables and saltwater intrusion, millions of acres of farmland have been permanently abandoned throughout northwestern Mexico and the American Southwest. In the Sonoran Desert, about 60 percent of the native vegetation has been converted or destroyed, and nearly all of its rivers have been diverted or dried up over the past century. In Arizona, only ten percent of the historic riparian habitat still survives. These landscape-scale changes in southwestern deserts have become an integral part of the region's ecological fabric and they cannot be ignored without giving false impressions.

Richard C. Brusca, PhD
Director of Conservation and Science
Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum
2021 N. Kinney Rd.
Tucson, AZ 85743-8918

Silent Spill: The Organization of an Industrial Crisis. By Thomas D. Beamish. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002. Pp. 220. \$21.95 softcover.

Invisible oil spills sit silently among us. Unable to capture our imagination with a photo of a tanker stranded on the rocks or the plaintive cry of an oil-soaked bird, these faceless spills continue for years. Those with the power to stop these unheard and unseen spills do nothing. In *Silent Spill*, Beamish introduces us to the granddaddy of all "silent spills"—the Guadalupe Dunes oil spill in California. He explains how such spills happen, but not from the traditional focus on ruptured pipelines or corroded tanks. Beamish describes, instead, the societal mechanisms at work in oil companies, government bureaucracies, and communities that aid and abet these silent spills and allow them to worsen long after they are discovered.

The Guadalupe Dunes sit on the California Coast about 170 miles north of Los Angeles. There, workers at a Unocal oil field spilled various oil products, quietly and chronically, for 38 years. The quantity spilled (10–20 million gallons) exceeded the amount spilled by the Exxon Valdez. But while the fouling of Alaska's Prince William Sound was national news and generated hundreds of stories, the Guadalupe Dunes spill, discovered during the same period, generated only nine stories between 1990 and 1996. Beamish analyzes why such spills generate so little news and why society does not stop them from continuing when they are first discovered.

Beamish begins by naming this problem—crescive troubles. Such troubles overcome us with stealthy, tiny increments that do not call attention to the larger picture. One increment is unworthy of attention.

The relentless accumulation of incremental steps eventually becomes a crisis beyond our ability to solve. The impossibility of solving the problem discourages us further, so the crisis grows even larger. This scenario describes crecive troubles and explains how an oil spill bigger than the spill from the Exxon Valdez saturated a six-square-mile area of California without ever being newsworthy.

Beamish begins by noting that we treat land spills very differently from marine spills. Oil spills happen on land 700 times more frequently than marine spills. Even so, while legislation has successfully reduced marine oil spills by 50 percent, regulation for land spills remains largely ineffective. More than 300,000 U.S. land sites have dangerously polluted soil and groundwater that will cost an estimated \$9 billion dollars to clean up. Why, Beamish asks, with a problem of this magnitude, does it garner so little public attention? Why don't we intervene sooner and more effectively?

Beamish identifies three groups in society who could have raised the alarm about the Guadalupe spill earlier but did not—first, the workers at the oil field; second, the government regulators who inspected the Unocal operation; and third, community members. His analysis of oil workers and regulators revealed a fundamental flaw in our regulatory process.

Beamish studied the sociological structure of oil field communities. Oil work is often isolated. The oil company pays well above the usual rate available for unskilled labor. At Guadalupe Dunes, field workers began their careers as unskilled utility men and worked their way up through the hierarchy. The lower levels of the hierarchy had no authority to report the spills, which were everyday occurrences and were readily apparent to a newcomer. Once a utility worker progressed to a level where he had authority to make an issue of the spilling, spills were part of the normal routine and no longer worthy of notice. By the time a worker attained a position with responsibility to report spills, he could not raise the alarm without also raising difficult questions as to why he had not reported the spills earlier. Thus, a conspiracy of silence developed in which Unocal oil workers did nothing to call attention to routine spills of as much as 200 barrels of oil a day.

If it was too much to ask powerless oil workers to pose hard questions, what of government regulators? Beamish gives a historical perspective that explains some of the lack of early regulatory response. In 1952, when the leaks probably began, chronic oil leaks were neither newsworthy, nor regulated. In the 1970s, public perception had changed, yet the leaks continued. The incremental nature of the spilling escaped control by a regulatory apparatus designed to handle "emergencies." Regulators later explained their failure to intervene sooner by saying that the spill was not a "tanker on the rocks." Such comments, combined with

his study of oil workers, led Beamish to suggest one cause of inadequate response to such spills.

Beamish explains that oil spills are self-reported by companies. A company whose tanker is on the rocks has little choice about whether to report it. The problem will be obvious soon enough. Smaller spills are different.

A small spill may never be detected. If enough time goes by, it may be difficult to determine who is responsible for multiple small spills. The anonymity of the multiple small spills at Guadalupe Dunes made the origin difficult to discern. As the spills accumulated and became progressively more obvious, Unocal actively misled officials and denied that the oil originated from their operations. This further delayed effective regulatory response. Regulators, lacking an "emergency," failed to do an independent investigation of Unocal's explanation. Beamish suggests that this sequence of events should cause us to question the effectiveness of self-reporting, particularly in such a hierarchical, insular industry. In the case of Guadalupe Dunes, gullible regulators and a deceptive company allowed the leaks to continue.

The first Unocal whistleblower stepped forward in 1990 but the silent nature of the spill failed to energize officials. Beamish explains this inaction by noting that regulators usually respond to an obvious oil spill such as a stranded tanker, not to a slow, invisible, pervasive leak. He contrasts marine spills, where the Coast Guard has clear regulatory authority, to a spill like the Guadalupe Dunes spill, where 18 different agencies had some form of jurisdiction and no one was in charge. Finally, a second whistleblower stepped forward and described where to find incriminating evidence in Unocal's offices.

Galvanized by the discovery of Unocal's duplicity, the regulators still had no tools with which to remediate the spill. Beamish asks, how does one "clean up" a largely underground spill that extends over six square miles? Agencies oriented to emergency response were ill suited to long-term management of pervasive contamination. Beamish illustrates the impotence of regulators when faced with a land-based spill and contrasts that with their later response to a marine spill that resulted from the land-based spill at Guadalupe Dunes.

Heavy winter rains brought on the marine spill. The rainfall raised the water table, the rising water table lifted the underground oil to the surface, and the rains carried it into the ocean. At last, the Coast Guard had something that fit its preconceived notion of an "oil spill." Relying on its sweeping regulatory authority originally granted to allow it to quickly respond to stranded tankers, the Coast Guard unilaterally decided to excavate a large section of beachfront to "clean" the oil soaked sands. Beamish describes the Coast Guard's ineffective efforts as a decision that destroyed the dunes in the process of "saving" them. He

conveys the profound irony in the massive effort focused on a tiny portion of beach while the vast majority of the spill sat silently next door like a huge oil soaked sponge.

Regrettably, a duplicitous corporation and ineffective regulators weren't enough to fully explain a spill of this size. Beamish focuses his analysis on community members as well. Why didn't swimmers complain more vociferously when ocean water burned their eyes and filled their nostrils with the stench of petroleum and the waves frothed with brown foam instead of white?

Here, the community's myth of San Luis Obispo County as a clean place, not like the "big city" where many people came from, proved its downfall. In truth, the county had been the focus of oil drilling for years and was nowhere near as clean as the myth led people to believe. The myth blinded people to the early signs of the spill and caused community members to initially minimize the reality of the spill. When they finally realized the truth, they were outraged at Unocal. The ensuing litigation against Unocal and state officials was born of the loss of public trust.

To summarize his analysis, Beamish identifies three factors that prevent earlier intervention in these silent spills: first, the hierarchical and insular nature of the industry; second, our regulatory apparatus that depends on self-reporting; and third, community myths. Beamish reveals that one result of the whistleblowers' efforts was that Unocal shut down the oil field and everyone lost their job. He suggests that we are unwise to depend on self-reporting in an industry where workers who report spills may risk everyone's livelihood.

Potential readers should be warned that this is a book of sociology, not technical information about the oil industry. This book required perseverance and work. Nevertheless, Beamish managed to make his points even to a reader who is not a sociologist by training. The reward for persistence was a new perspective on oil contamination and a considerably broader understanding of why such spills happen.

There are two shortcomings to *Silent Spill*. It desperately needs a map. Not everyone is familiar enough with California geography to be able to place this event in its proper geographic context. Although the book starts out with text describing the location of the site, that was not enough orientation. Later chapters refer to places such as San Luis Obispo County, Avila Beach, and an oil spill off the Santa Barbara coast. Clueless, I finally had to retrieve the road map of the western United States from the car so that I could create a mental picture of the locations of the events Beamish describes.

The second shortcoming to *Silent Spill* is its inadequate description of the physical causes of the spill. Although this is a book about sociology, not decrepit physical equipment, the magnitude of the

spill provoked too many unanswered questions. It is only natural to wonder how (in the physical sense) a 20 million gallon oil spill occurs over 38 years. Minimal textual descriptions and a random endnote or two left my curiosity unsatisfied. There should have been a short section in the introduction that described the physical causes of the spill.

Other than these minor imperfections, *Silent Spill* was well-worth reading. It provided a refreshing new look at "how" oil spills happen and should be required reading for anyone interested in changing the regulations that apply to oil spills. Understanding the social dynamics inherent in these systems will inform legislators, regulators, and citizens how to prevent future spills and craft more effective regulations.

Carol M. Parker
MS, University of Rochester
MBA, University of New Mexico
JD Candidate, University of New Mexico

The Greening of Conservative America. By John R.E. Bliese. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002. Pp. 339. \$33.00 hardcover; \$27.00 paper.

Anyone interested in American environmental policy will feel at least a twinge of curiosity after reading the title of this book, *The Greening of Conservative America*. The greening of what? Author John R.E. Bliese, associate professor of communication studies at Texas Tech University, took on an extraordinary task with this brave publication. You don't have to be a professor or a politician to know that protection of our environment and natural resources is generally a priority for those at the left end of the political spectrum. The author challenges this generalization on every page of his book. In *The Greening of Conservative America*, Bliese, a self-declared conservative, not only calls for a conservative environmental agenda but also presents conservative programs to address environmental concerns. And, in his opinion, any principled conservative should embrace his proposals because a failure to do so would be a departure from the values most fundamental to conservative beliefs.

The structure of the book is simple and well suited to promote the author's innovative ideas and approaches to law and policy. Bliese begins with a discussion of common misconceptions about environmentalism and an explanation of fundamental conservative principles. After laying this foundation, Bliese begins his examination of current policies regarding a handful of environmental issues. And, of course, he doesn't stop after examining current policy. At the heart of this book are his strong suggestions for the agenda that conservatives