

Some brief notes on coal oil point nature reserve

October 12, 2018

I just went out to Coal Oil Point Nature Reserve to see what could be seen. The landscape is dominated by platform Holly, the now decommissioning oil well once owned by Veneco and infamous for its role in the Santa Barbara oil spill. The other thing you notice immediately is that surrounding area is now a nature reserve for the Snowy Plover among other endangered species. The juxtaposition of the oil rig right in front of you and the nature reserve right next to you is to me symbolic of the kind of mainstream environmentalism Santa Barbara has become known for. A sign as you enter the beach area says "here are some ways you can reduce your impact on the beach" and then you look up and the rig looms over you. The sardonic irony is stark and emblematic of the kind Big Green conservationist environmentalism that the environmental justice movement so explicitly rejects. It encapsulates the scale of the environmental crisis and some within the environmental movement's refusal to acknowledge its systemic roots, instead preferring to tinker around the edges. Also importance resonances of the individual/consumer vs. systemic/producer debate is captured by the sign asking sunbathers and surfers to pick up their trash while the no reference is made to the rig and the spill it caused 50 years ago. I think in showing how the landscape captures this contradiction or debate our work here can be used as a pivot point to shift post SB oil spill narratives away from the kind of conservationist, and towards an environmental justice discourse that is commensurate with the scale of the ecological and social crises we face today.

Further in the distance and out to sea, just on the horizon and to the right of platform Holly you can make out 2 other platforms both owned by Exxon. When Plains All American's pipeline ruptured in 2015, Exxon had to suspend pumping at these platforms, it is now applying for trucking permits while Plains seeks permits to get its pipeline replaced – this would reopen offshore drilling at these three wells. Pipeline 96 takes oil from the wells to shore near El Capitan, Plains All American then pumps the oil north, before another pipeline pumps it inland. I think positioning Coal Oil Point within this energy infrastructure corridor will be productive too. Reading the signposts I also discovered some history about the location itself. The signposts make sweeping reference to how the Chumash lived off the land (often casting them as characters from the past rather than still being here today). The sign posts then provide a history in slightly finer grain. The land was purchased in 1919 by a British army Colonel named Campbell who settled his family. Campbell built a large ranch, a beach house and a cemetery on the land. It was then bought by the wealthy Devereux family. Miss Devereux built a school for children with disabilities on the land and then sold it to UCSB in the 60s, it became a nature reserve in 1973.

October 15, 2018

I met with Cristina (Cris) this afternoon. Cris runs the Coal Oil Point Nature Reserve Nature Centre and she was quite a useful source of information. Interestingly, not even she knows why coal oil point is called coal oil point and she has been working there for over 20 years. The natural seeps are some of the largest in the world and these altered prospectors to the potential of their being offshore reserves. It's one of the most studied places in the world with regards to the impact of the natural seeps. For a long time there have been "umbrellas" under water to capture natural gas and oil seeps. These used to be harvested by a barge but now are pumped through a pipeline. I'd be interested to find out about how the discourse around "natural seeps" masks the impacts of unnatural extraction. Apparently, the area from coal oil point through to Ellwood and beyond was all built on in the 1930s with several piers for offshore drilling as well as a large oil field developed on shore. Platform Holly drills into the offshore Ellwood field. It would be interesting to find records of Colonel Campbell (who apparently moved to SB to avoid paying taxes in England) and his

family selling leases to have the land commercially developed for oil. You can still see the mansion he built but never lived to see completed. In the 1800s it was ranch land but it wasn't very good for growing crops so mostly just pasture for cows. This obviously wrecked the native plant species. In 1942 a Japanese submarine fired shells at the Ellwood oil field but did relatively little damage. The Devereux family bought some of the land in the 1940s and built a school for children with disabilities. According to Cris, UCSB bought the area in the 1990s. The conservation project had been working with Venoco to restore the land and decommission the oil infrastructure but since Venoco went bankrupt in 2015, it's unclear where the money will come from to continue clean up efforts but it looks like the UC or the state are left with the costs.

Almost all of the oil infrastructure is gone now but when the tide is very low you can see some of the places where the piers' beams would've been. They left one old rusty beam about a mile down the beach which I've walked passed a few times. They use it to mark sand levels. Inland you can also see two very large oil tanks which is where Venoco used to store their oil before the pipeline was built. I'm interested in finding out more about the decommissioning of the site. Cris is worried about the Bureau of Land Management and Trump administration's recent decision to open up vast amounts of public land nearby to fracking. She was at a meeting where local politicians suggested this was retaliation for years of opposition to oil here. She also mentioned some useful sources: We should talk to Peter Alagona and Hank Pitcher who both have some knowledge of local environmental history. Apparently, there's also a documentary called Bringing Back the Wild on youtube or vimeo by Michael Love, about restoration efforts in the area. There's also an online bibliography of a lot of the research that's been done on UC reserves. Google UCNRS and look for coal oil point then type in history under keywords. She suggested we look at GoletaHistory.com and visit the Goleta Historical Society. Cris is actually looking for an intern to help curate the history of the site so once she's found someone we could work with them. If we want to take the class to the reserve or if we want to do research on the reserve we need to go through a RAMS application online.