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Oil's Odor Spread the Bad News

■ **Beachfront:** People's worst fears began to materialize in Surf City. The smell 'socked you right in the face,' a lifelong resident said.

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HUNTINGTON BEACH—In the beginning, it was the smell that signaled that trouble was bearing down on Surf City.

At first, of course, the odor was faint and people did not give it much thought. But as it got stronger, as the smell wafted toward the coast from out in the sea, people's worst fears began to materialize.

Oil spill. The two dirty words that all California beach-lovers

■ DRY HOLES

Huntington Beach once was dotted with oil rigs. But times are a-changin' and the number has drastically declined. N1

have come to despise were suddenly on everyone's lips in Huntington Beach.

"It just socked you right in the face," said Jeffrey Krips, 34, a lifelong resident of Huntington Beach. He and his son, Frank, were hit by the smell as they left a seaside restaurant. Immediately, both father and son knew the stakes.

"Frank wanted to go get a video camera to take pictures of all the animals we're going to lose," the elder Krips said. Predictably, within hours, the first dead bird was found.

Diane Tuko, a bartender at Cagney's by the Sea on Ocean Avenue at Main Street, arrived for work about 6 p.m. As she got out of the car, the smell stunned her.

"It smelled like everyone in the world was putting gas in their car at the same time," she said.

The spill wasn't the kind of disaster easily seen. By nightfall, the only visible evidence of it was helicopters hovering over the center of the spill and the dim lights from the boats of work crews. Except for whitecaps close to shore, there were no other noticeable blemishes on the ocean surface on the full-moon night.

Any view of the crippled American Trader quickly disappeared into the darkness as word of the spill spread. By the middle of the evening, bicyclists and hand-holding couples were walking around the area. Some stopped at Maxwell's Restaurant at the foot of the decrepit Huntington Beach pier and looked through binoculars into the gloomy darkness, doubtless wondering how soon the oil would be upon them. Bystanders said they were surprised to discover that the smell was pungent to the point of being overpowering in a given spot, then barely noticeable just dozens of yards away.

In the aftermath of the spill, the requiems came quickly.

"Oh, goodness," said Janice Belk, who with her husband bicycles along the Huntington Beach shore every morning, taking special delight in surfers.

"We won't be seeing the surfers," she said. "We'll be seeing the dead fish and the dead birds."

On the beach, in front of where the cleanup efforts were concentrated, a group of young adults had fashioned a two-foot-long mound of sand, marked by a cross made from pieces of abandoned wood and two empty, quart-sized plastic oil cans. "The marker represents the death of our planet," said Cal State Long Beach student Robert Barton, 24, of Huntington Beach, one

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of the people who made the grave. "This oil spill is just one more thing to contribute to it."

Dina DiStefano, 26, of Irvine and a student specializing in environmental issues at El Camino College in Torrance, said, "I am just sick about this. . . . I feel just as responsible as the oil company for what happened here. How can we not protect our most precious resources?"

Huntington Beach is inextricably linked to the myth of the eternal California summer. But while the Beach Boys sang about "shootin' the pier" at Huntington and Malibu, the city also has a heritage tied to the oil business—making Wednesday's incident an ironic commingling of two of the city's most identifiable traditions.

Oil was first discovered in 1920 at the intersection of Clay Avenue

and Golden West Street. In the ensuing years, oil rigs were as common as the sunset in Huntington Beach. Indeed, having an oil derrick in your back yard was seen as a mark of distinction. The Oilers is the nickname for Huntington Beach High School.

Much of Huntington Beach's lure as a surf mecca centered around its historic pier, built in 1914. Shut down 1½ years ago, the pier attracted 1.5 million visitors a year in its salad days.

That is not to say that Surf City had not been a victim before.

Mother Nature did a number on the Huntington Beach Pier in 1983, when a violent storm ripped out 30 pilings and 500 square feet of deck and substructure. When the storm left, the End Cafe and a bait shack teetered at the end of the pier. Demolition crews finished the job on them.

Then, in January, 1988, two days of heavy surf knocked into the sea 250 feet of pier, including the rebuilt End Cafe. The rest of the pier, judged structurally unsound, is now closed, pending efforts to raise money to rebuild it.

But that was nature; this was man.

Because Huntington Beach holds a fond spot in the hearts of surfers and other lovers of the myths of a simpler California, the news was especially disheartening.

Michael Christensen, 24, grew up on the water along Huntington Beach. His passions are surfing, scuba diving and sailing—a Californian in love with the ocean.

"We hear about things like the Alaska accident and we think, 'Oh, it could never happen to us,'" Christensen said. "But it's happening—right now."

"When you look at your own hometown, you can't imagine it. . . ."

Staff Writer Jerry Hicks contributed to this report.