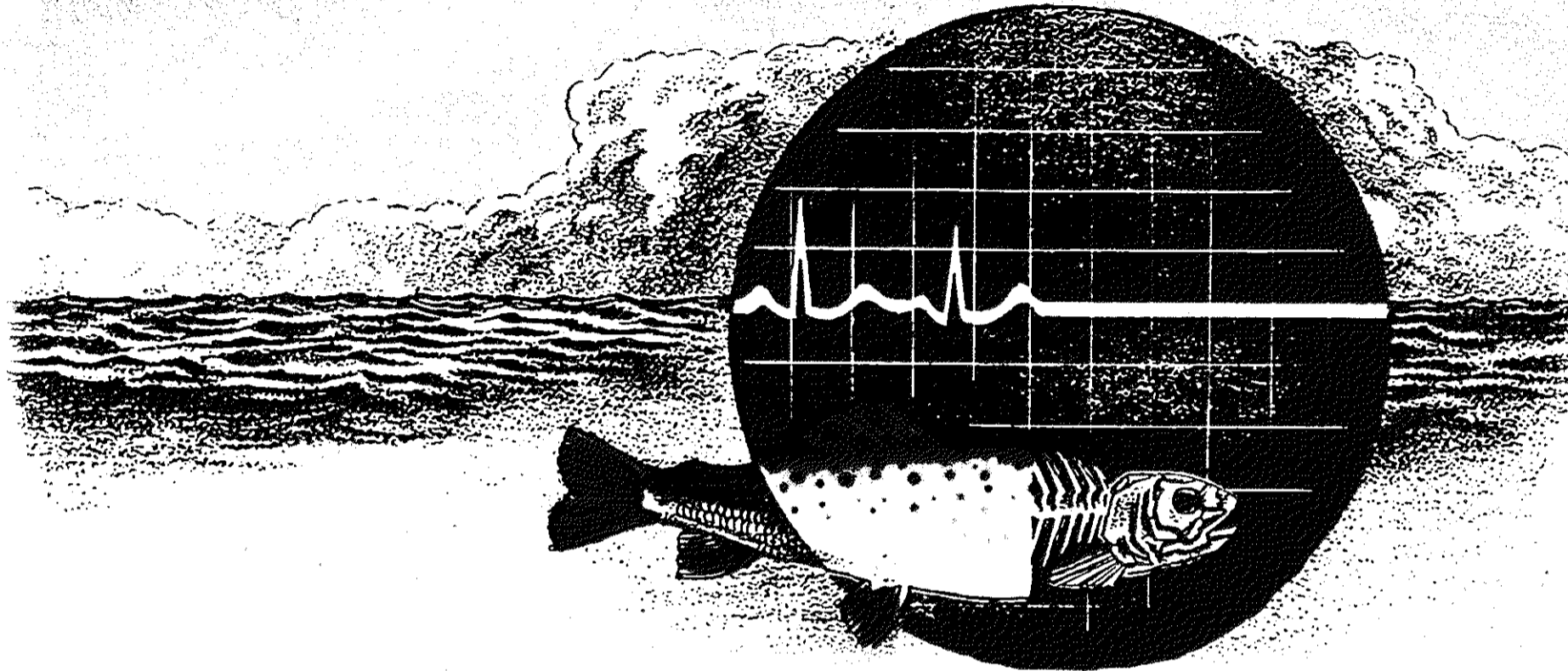


## ENVIRONMENT



## Another day at the beach — one year later

By HILLARY HAUSER

Exactly one year ago my guest commentary, "Another day at the beach?" was published in the News-Press Sunday Perspective section, and from the community there came an immediate outcry of pain that was nothing less than chilling.

Radio announcers read the commentary over the air, there was a demonstration at the county building, with 200 people showing up with signs and placards that said things like "Ocean or Outhouse?" and my telephone rang off the hook, with sad and angry people wanting to know what they could do.

Basically, that commentary focused on the outrage of our ocean being used as a dump for our waste, with no one — especially the agencies charged with overseeing ocean pollution matters — doing anything about it. The piece illustrated how these agencies, supported by our tax dollars, are defending polluters.

Listening to people weep and vent their fury, I realized somewhere deep down in all of us there is an innate sense that by polluting our ocean we have defiled ourselves. Deep down, we know Earth is the only planet that has an ocean, that there would be no such thing as air, water, weather — or even a human being — without the sea! Mother Ocean, we call her, and our Mother is sick and close to death.

Jeff Young and I formed Heal the Ocean to apply public pressure to the problem and to initiate solutions on a local level. This past year has been one wild ride.

On one hand, Santa Barbara has come very far in ocean awareness, both at the public and governmental levels. Soon after the demonstration on its administration building, the county allocated \$150,000 to the formation of Project Clean Water, whose mandate was to have the beaches open by Memorial Day. The beaches are open, but this is not because of anything that has been done by Project Clean Water so far. Santa Barbara had a very dry winter.

After working on this problem of ocean pollution for one full year, there are successes to report, but there are big obstacles to report as well. Much has been organized and discussed and talked about, there have been heaps of newspaper and radio ads about hotlines to call to report spills and other such offenses, but progress continues to bog down in issues of money — and the mindset of getting away with what we can get away with. Although we have made some progress at the political

level, the significant leaps forward have been — and will be — on the part of citizens taking matters into their own hands. One homeowner called Heal the Ocean to say he had voluntarily switched from septic to sewer after reading all the news reports. One beachfront homeowner association of 72 homes — the Rincon — has voluntarily decided to proceed with a \$2.1 million switch from their old septic systems to go on sewer. Other homeowner associations have called Heal the Ocean for help in switching over, too.

Heal the Ocean is specifically focusing its efforts on five fronts:

- The sewage effluent flowing into the Santa Barbara Channel must not add pathogens, bacteria or toxic compounds to the sea.
- Septic systems, which operate on the principle of



Hillary Hauser covered marine issues for the News-Press from 1981 to 1987. She lives in Summerland.

leaching — using the ground to filter our bacteria — must be immediately surveyed and inspected for potential water quality problems throughout the county, with the most immediate attention given to those systems on or near the beach or next to creeks.

- Storm water drainage into the sea, and dumping into storm drains, must be dealt with.
- Harbor dredging, in which the bottom of the harbor gets picked up and spewed down the coast, must be reassessed with independent testing.
- Tajiguas Landfill, where Santa Barbara's trash is stacked into a pristine coastal canyon with a creek running through it, needs to be cleaned up, capped and closed.

After announcing itself at the county administration building demonstration, Heal the Ocean first focused its attention on the Rincon. There were widespread reports of surfers getting sick after being in the water there, and surfers felt the bacteria from failing septic systems were getting into the sea.

The task was relatively simple. Heal the Ocean picked

up the phone and called a number of Rincon homeowners, and many of them said they had problems, including sewage backing up into a living room. We called the Carpinteria Sanitary District and its manager, John Miko, agreed the district could and would hook up these homes to sewer. Another phone call to the sanitary district engineers, Penfield and Smith, resulted in a price for a preliminary engineering study.

Heal the Ocean started a fund with seed money, and more phone calls to interested environmental groups, including CURE (Clean Up Rincon Effluent) and Surf Rider (Ventura and Santa Barbara chapters) brought in more money. So did calls to Project Clean Water and the Rincon homeowners themselves. Heal the Ocean ordered the study, it was completed at the beginning of June and on July 4 the Rincon homeowners unanimously voted to proceed with the next steps necessary to hook up their homes to sewer.

Heal the Ocean applauds the Rincon for taking this matter into their own hands. No one had definitive tests for this — it was based entirely on common sense. Septic tanks and leach fields do not belong on the beach, where ground water is shallow. In one case, there are leach fields below sea level.

For most of the year we attended numerous meetings and hearings where we have learned that the common sense approach was not going to fly with the county or the city. We were told pollution sources have to be proven definitively before there will be enforcement and change. Project Clean Water organized creek walks to identify potential bacteria sources, and allocated a big chunk of its \$150,000 budget to testing for bacteria in creeks. Yet those tests could not distinguish the sources of bacteria, whether bird, man or dog, and since county officials stated they would or could not go after polluters without specific proof, these tests didn't get us anywhere.

Heal the Ocean lobbied the county to use DNA testing, which specifically identifies what and where the bacteria is coming from. Getting nowhere with our argument, we raised money to pay for it ourselves. It took us a while to get the right laboratory, and finally we turned to the University of Washington laboratory of Dr. Mansour Samadpour, who had already been successful in identifying sources of bacteria in the San Diego area and in Puget Sound. These tests, however, were much more complicated and much more expensive than we

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# Confronting the ecological dangers ahead

## OCEAN

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expected — \$36,000 for Rincon Creek alone.

This time around, the county's Environmental Services Department decided to go along with us on the DNA program, and chipped in \$12,500 to the DNA tests, principally to pay for getting assay samples of local bacteria sources up to the University of Washington. Using a contribution from Chevron (\$10,000) and Arco (\$3,000), Heal the Ocean paid the \$23,500 tab for the actual lab testing, the results of which are due any day. Hopefully, the DNA tests will point to specific sources — and hopefully, something will be done about them.

In this matter, Heal the Ocean is happy to note that the pressure of going our own way brought the county along on a more pro-active program to do something out our pollution problems. After Rincon, there are many more creeks to study. We hope our continued pressure will erase a certain wary approach to enforcement action in the matter of illegal spills and dumping.

When Project Clean Water installed its Save Our Shoreline (SOS) hotline, there was much touting of it being an "action line." When Heal the Ocean received a call of an unsightly spill off Carpinteria Bluffs, in the tidal zone, we personally went to check the area and saw what the call had been about. Swirling around the tide pools was a layer of gunk — foam and oil — that looked like the dumping of a boat bilge. We called the SOS line, which got us to the Environmental Health Department, which sent two agents to the area. Their report back to us was that they looked at the ocean from the bluffs with binoculars and didn't see anything. They did not go down to the beach, which is the only way they could have seen what was happening in the tidal zone.

In May, when Heal the Ocean received a report of a raw sewage spill at Miramar Beach, we went to investigate. We were told Environmental Health officials had been there, looked at the situation and determined that dye testing of old, abandoned septic tanks needed to be done. Two days later, when Heal the Ocean got another call, this time irate, we called the Montecito Fire Department and the Montecito Sanitary District. The Sanitary District maintenance man was on site immediately, and identified the problem as a failed pump, which had caused the backup and three days of spillage of raw sewage into the ocean where children were playing. The maintenance man fixed the pump within a few hours. Heal the Ocean demanded that Project Clean Water investigate, at least take a look at the maintenance records on the pump, and reprimand the Montecito Sanitary District for a spill of raw sewage. There was no reprimand.

When Heal the Ocean called the county hotline to report a consistent daily dumping of detergents and other unidentified substances into the gutter a side street of a State Street restaurant, we were told, "There are detergents there, but nothing is wrong."

We will continue to push on this non-action problem as it relates to illegal dumping in the streets, in the sea, and on the beach.

Soon after Heal the Ocean formed, we lobbied the county for a mandatory septic tank ordinance, requiring all septic owners to have their systems checked by a qualified engineer as to their working order. We feel it is much like the mandatory smog checking of automobiles. We are becoming aware, painfully, that the ground is not as solid as once believed. What goes into the ground in one place ends up in another.

Project Clean Water appointed a subcommittee to this issue, and two Heal the Ocean representatives, John Robinson and Joel Smith, regularly attended meetings to push for a serious ordinance. At the end of July, however, the Environmental Health Department told the Board of Supervisors that "no direct link between septic systems and pollution problems" had been established, and requested the ordinance to include only mapping of systems and public education.

Supervisor Naomi Schwartz, however, took seriously Heal the Ocean's recommendation that faulty septic systems had been implicated in human health hazards all over the country, and that Santa Barbara County should consider itself no exception. We appreciate her leading the board to a unanimous vote to direct the Project Clean Water working committee to draft language for an ordinance requiring regular checks of old septic systems as well as those in high-risk areas such as on the coast or next to creeks. To this end, Heal the Ocean is donating the services of a reputable mapping company to help identify high-risk areas.

The subject of sewage disposal at sea has never been on the list of items to be discussed in Project Clean Water but it has always been a priority of Heal the Ocean. With 16 million gallons a day of sewage effluent going into the Santa Barbara Channel, we feel this is a serious issue that cannot be ignored.

The day Heal the Ocean announced itself at the public demonstration at the county administration building, the managers of the five sanitary districts stated that more aggressive treatment of sewage effluent is "barking up the wrong tree." Kamil Azoury, general manager of the Goleta Sanitary District, which still dumps a sewage mix of primary low-level treated sewage, stated, "untreated water containing bacteria is discharged into the ocean from many other locations. People need to pick up after their pets and take more responsibility for properly disposing of trash to keep creeks and beaches cleaner."

Jerry Smith, manager of the Montecito Sanitary District, pointed to stream runoff, urban runoff, agricultural runoff and animal waste as the culprits. All of the managers stated that upgrading sewage treatment would cost the taxpayers millions and result in "barely detectable improvement in the quality of water pumped into the ocean."

Therefore, Heal the Ocean conducted a nationwide search for a laboratory that tests for waterborne viruses, and finally located Dr. Jed Fuhrman at USC, who does this work. Under contract with Heal the Ocean, a technician came to Santa Barbara in June to collect six samples from Santa Barbara's El Estero sew-

age effluent, as well as that of Goleta.

At the end of July, we had the results: There were human enteric viruses (poliovirus, echovirus and cocksackievirus) in five out of the six samples. Other types of tests are needed to detect the presence of hepatitis and other related viruses. Heal the Ocean has received a generous donation from the Santa Barbara Channel Foundation's Science and Education Committee specifically for testing for viruses from sewage outfalls, and we plan to investigate this problem further.

The preliminary results, however, are shocking enough, and confirm what we have suspected — sewage effluent is putting dangerous viruses as well as bacteria into our nearshore waters.

The USC virus report is just the beginning of our war on this business of putting sewage effluent into the ocean. We are looking at everything, including the shallow-water (surf zone) dumping by Carpinteria (25 feet), Summerland (18 feet), and Montecito (28 feet). Heal the Ocean feels very strongly that our commonly accepted practice of using the ocean to dilute our human waste must end.

Meanwhile, Heal the Ocean has been diving and filming local sewer outfalls with Jeff Maassen, a local urchin diver and Heal the Ocean advisory board member, who has offered us his boat and services. With a generous offer of a submersible from National Geographic's Sustainable Seas Expedition, we organized a dive on the Montecito sewer outfall at the beginning of June. This outfall empties into 28 feet of water — the surf zone — in front of Butterfly Beach near the Biltmore Hotel. Maassen and I had already explored the nearby underwater area of Hammond's reef just down-current, where we collected dozens of diseased urchins, found a half-dead spider crab, and did not see one fish.

Prior to this dive on a Friday in April, Heal

Somewhere deep down in all of us there is an innate sense that by polluting our ocean we have defiled ourselves.

the Ocean assembled a meeting of the sanitary district managers, to tell them we were taking a look at their practices. This was a lively, congenial, dialogue.

On Monday a call came to us from Mike Higgins, associate water resource control engineer of the Regional Water Quality Control Board in San Luis Obispo. He explained he had received a phone call from the Santa Barbara Water Resources Department, stating Heal the Ocean "had a certain view of things." We had been arguing against the city's plan to use less chlorine to disinfect sewage effluent from its El Estero outfall, which will relax bacterial levels from 23/ml to 2,300/ml. Higgins said the relaxation of disinfectant of the El Estero wastewater was OK by his agency, based on the data received from the district's self-monitoring program.

"The outfall is one and a half miles long," Higgins said. "The idea is to get it offshore so that the effluent won't get back on the beaches. ... The viruses and bacteria are going to be removed by being discharged into an inhospitable ocean environment."

The foolish philosophy of the 1950s and 1960s — The solution to pollution is dilution — is still the *modus operandi* for the Regional Water Quality Control Board and EPA, which condones this practice.

Higgins said he favored the reduction of chlorine because it "reacts to an organic compound in water that becomes extremely toxic ... to human life, sea life, and gets passed down the food chain."

When asked why Carpinteria, Summerland and Montecito are allowed to discharge effluent so close to shore, in the surf zone, Higgins said, "Because they chlorinate to 23."

He had just stated that this amount of chlorine is highly toxic to humans and to sea life and gets passed down the food chain.

"Yes, this is generating toxicity," Higgins answered. "We'd have to look at this."

Heal the Ocean finds it reprehensible that the agency whose mandate is to oversee water quality control issues is functioning as a public relations firm for the polluters. We do not advocate putting chlorine into the ocean, but until we get into place an entirely new way of dealing with our human waste — tertiary treatment — we do not condone putting more viruses and bacteria into the sea.

Despite our arguments and appearances before the City Council, council members voted June 22 to relax disinfection of Santa Barbara's sewage from the El Estero plant, and the permit that allows them to do this extends five years. This action was based on an Ecomar study, paid for by the city, stating that the relaxation of disinfectant showed no measurable improvement in water quality.

On July 2, the state Department of Health Services advised the Regional Water Quality Control Board that the Ecomar report contained numerous inconsistencies, and that the relaxation of disinfectant would have a "potential public health impact." It recommended against the adoption of the city's request for relaxation.

At the end of July, the Santa Barbara Public Works Department was still arguing with these findings, stating that since there are no standards for viruses, it is "not reasonable or appropriate to require the city of Santa Barbara to fund and conduct a viral study."

As I write this, the Heal the Ocean/USC viral study is on its way to the state Department of Health.

Many times during the past year it has occurred to me that the chief problem in our struggle for clean water is the sub-nature of the ocean — submarine, subconscious — under, down there, out of sight, where no one can see. I have often thought Heal the Ocean's biggest challenge has been to bring what's happening in the submarine world to the surface, into the light. Meanwhile, it is reprehensible to us that our wastewater managers are so vehemently participating in a death of a thousand

cuts of the sea.

Heal the Ocean has been actively involved, too, in the issue of the Tajiguas landfill, which is only eight months away from reaching its permitted capacity. For the past year, Santa Barbara County has moved forward, hell-or-high-water, with an EIR that focuses on expansion of the existing site in an area that has been proposed in Congress as a National Seashore.

Tajiguas is next to the ocean, and Pila Creek runs through the canyon to the sea. Erosion is a major nightmare in a landfill that is leaching into the sea. Heal the Ocean does not believe that a landfill belongs in a coastal canyon, lined or unlined, and we believe the current landfill should be capped and closed, to minimize future damage from a mistake we made in the past. We have joined a chorus of discontent from other local environmental groups in this matter, and requested in May from the county Public Works Department all of the data, test results, analyses of data, monitoring results and reports of any pollution or water quality parameter of Pila Creek, Arroyo Quemada Creek and the monitoring wells from January 1990 to present. We are wading through these documents now.

At a recent Board of Supervisors hearing, many environmental groups and individuals stood up to decry the board's steamrolling ahead with the Tajiguas disaster, and Heal the Ocean board member Jean-Michel Cousteau publicly denounced expansion as a "cop out." Heal the Ocean insists that another, more appropriate, landfill site be developed within Santa Barbara County, and on an interim basis the county must consider out-of-county hauling to an appropriate landfill. There are many state-of-the-art landfills willing to take our business while we work this out. This, in addition to a serious approach to serious recycling, is a formula that could stop our garbage from being piled up next to the sea.

As for the argument that "we can't ship our waste to someone else's county," Heal the Ocean insists that we must not think regionally, but geologically — what is best for the environment, for everybody. There isn't one county on this Earth — desert, mountain or otherwise — that is not going to be adversely affected by a polluted ocean. Santa Barbara, being next to an ocean, is a steward of that ocean for everyone, including people who live in the desert, mountains and elsewhere. To push the industrialization of Tajiguas ahead of the calendar for the proposed National Seashore along the Gaviota Coast, we feel, shows reckless disregard for the environment.

Santa Barbara's citizens are outraged about the condition of our ocean, they are screaming about it, and the calls and letters we get every day are evidence of this. Heal the Ocean is concerned that our elected officials are not listening well enough. In May the city of Santa Barbara conducted a telephone survey to determine the level of public support for proposed bond measures to raise money for public safety construction programs. Heal the Ocean heard about this poll, and demanded to have water quality issues included in the list of questions.

A full 61 percent of respondents declared creek and beachwater contamination as "extremely serious" or "very serious," and the next largest percentage of public concern went to drugs and drug abuse at 30 percent. However, the people who worried about ocean pollution were not asked specifics in the poll, such as whether they would support (1) a step-up on fixing old, leaking sewer lines, (2) upgrading sewage effluent treatment, or (3) financial help for homeowners wanting to get off septic systems and onto sewer. Such detailed questions were asked on the other subjects, which skewed poll results and resulted in a News-Press headline, "Poll shows voters favor new police station."

At a Town Hall meeting in May, a crowd of local citizens literally screamed that they wanted their ocean cleaned up. The panel of state and county officials listening to this outcry included state Sen. Jack O'Connell, state Assemblywoman Hannah-Beth Jackson, officials from the Environmental Health Department and Project Clean Water, Santa Barbara's mayor and county supervisors. The people stomped and cheered at the suggestion that \$37 million should go to fixing old sewer lines instead of a new police station.

Nevertheless, on your November ballot, you are going to see a bond measure in support of a new \$37 million police station. That \$37 million would more than pay for fixing old, leaking sewer lines. It would pay a good chunk of what it would cost to upgrade all of our sewage plants to tertiary treatment levels. It is time to let your elected representatives know what you think about all this! Heal the Ocean can barely keep up with the expensive list of plans, both on county and city levels, that will sap taxpayers wallets for projects that don't reflect what taxpayers want most.

It is August in our fair city. It is warm and dry. People are playing in the sea and all seems well. This is a false promise. We must remember that not one thing has happened yet that will forestall a bacteria-laden winter. The rains will come, septic systems will leach into the creeks and into the sea and overloaded sewers will spill. The creeks will contribute human and animal waste, and storm drains will flush our streets directly into the ocean, too. We cannot be complacent.

In January, the scientists at the national meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science heard reports of dying coral, diseased shellfish and waters infected with human viruses as the seas rise in temperature and pollution from the land intensifies. James W. Porter, an ocean studies specialist at the University of Georgia, said in an Associated Press report, "These are cries and whispers beginning to confront us about the ecological dangers ahead. We are finding disturbing new kinds of things."

It is time for our public officials, and all of us, to realize that the ecological dangers we face are very real. At Heal the Ocean we are grateful that progress has been made in the past year, but there is still so much more to do. So very much more.