

Captain's Log: Thick Coat of Oil Covers Sea Off Isla Vista, But It's Completely Natural

Captain David Bacon, NOOZHAWK, 3-3-14

Capt. David Bacon operates WaveWalker Charters and is president of SOFTIN Inc., a nonprofit organization providing seafaring opportunities for those in need.

Running up the coast from Santa Barbara on my charter boat, WaveWalker, we passed Goleta, then Campus Point and as we beat our way uphill (against wind and waves) off of Isla Vista, my passengers noticed a thick oil sheen on the surface of the sea, accentuated by current-breaks where the gooey stuff had congealed and formed long, meandering lines.

My passengers went nuts. One yelled for me to call the Coast Guard. Another had her cell phone out and was calling the authorities to report an oil spill. I had to calmly and sternly tell them to calm down and listen to me.

It happens every time we take newbies up the coast past Isla Vista and Coal Oil Point. They see a thick coat of oil on the surface of the sea and they think it is an oil spill. Then they look out toward Platform Holly (right off of Coal Oil Point) and suspect a massive oil spill.

I can't blame them, because it certainly does look bad, but the thing is, it is completely natural seepage of oil and gas out of the ocean floor. That is part of our educational program while out on charters. It usually goes smoother than it did this time.

Looking back in history, that natural seepage looks to be what caused the massive oil industry expansion in that area many decades ago. What really tickles me is that back then, Santa Barbara had a tourism marketing plan that touted the health benefits of our "therapeutic airs," which, considering our prevailing winds, often wafted in from the area of natural seepage. It makes me laugh to think we made money from the smell.

Maybe I shouldn't be laughing. I would only be mildly surprised should an enterprising MD write a book about the benefits of oily airs and Santa Barbara rolled out the marketing campaign anew. Stranger things have happened.

What amazes me is the resiliency of the natural environment and its ability to assimilate what looks to be a large volume of oil and natural gas. The area has loads of fish, and before the economically damaging Marine Protected Areas went into effect, we fished the area successfully. Marine mammals don't mind the oil and gas. I've seen whales, dolphin, porpoise and even a big sea turtle casually swimming through it all without a care in the world. After carefully observing the critters, I'm impressed that the oil doesn't seem to stick and accumulate on their hide.