



Silent Spill: The Organization of an Industrial Crisis (Urban and Industrial Environments)

Thomas D. Beamish

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In the Guadalupe Dunes, 170 miles north of Los Angeles and 250 miles south of San Francisco, an oil spill persisted unattended for 38 years. Over the period 1990-1996, the national press devoted 504 stories to the Exxon Valdez accident and a mere nine to the Guadalupe spill--even though the latter is most likely the nation's largest recorded oil spill. Although it was known to oil workers in the field where it originated, to visiting regulators, and to locals who frequented the beach, the Guadalupe spill became troubling only when those involved could no longer view the sight and smell of petroleum as normal. This book recounts how this change in perception finally took place after nearly four decades and what form the response took. Taking a sociological perspective, Thomas Beamish examines the organizational culture of the Unocal Corporation (whose oil fields produced the leakage), the interorganizational response of regulatory agencies, and local interpretations of the event. He applies notions of social organization, social stability, and social inertia to the kind of environmental degradation represented by the Guadalupe spill. More important, he uses the Guadalupe Dunes case as the basis for a broader study of environmental "blind spots." He argues that many of our most pressing pollution problems go unacknowledged because they do not cause large-scale social disruption or dramatic visible destruction of the sort that triggers responses. Finally, he develops a model of social accommodation that helps explain why human systems seem inclined to do nothing as trouble mounts.

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