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## How Clean Is Portland Harbor?

Lance Tapley  
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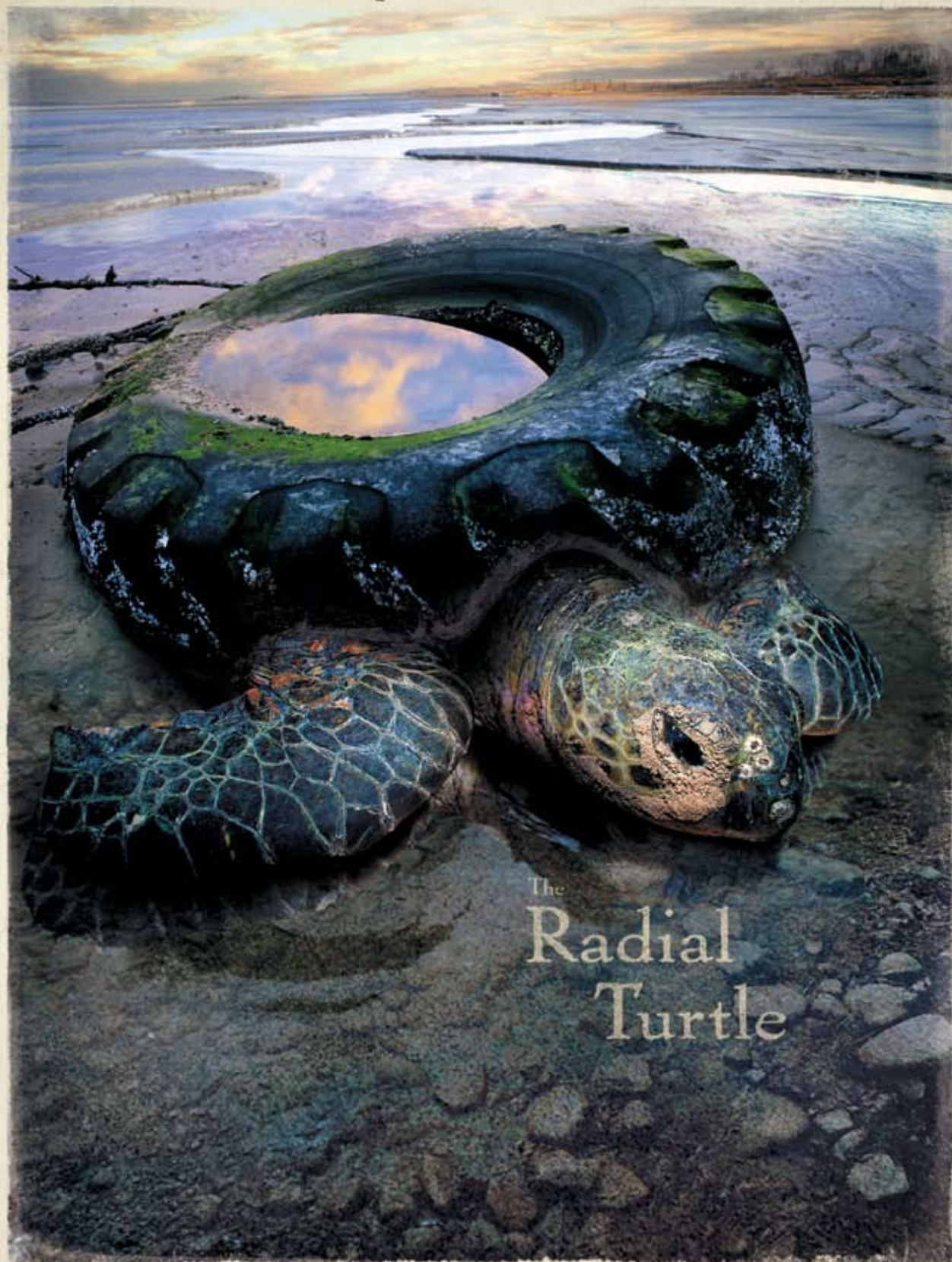
With the beach closures in the Gulf of Maine last summer, just...

# How Clean *Is* Portland Harbor?

BY LANCE TAPLEY



# Non-Native Species of the California Coast



The  
Radial  
Turtle

CALIFORNIA COASTAL CLEANUP DAY  
The third Saturday of every September



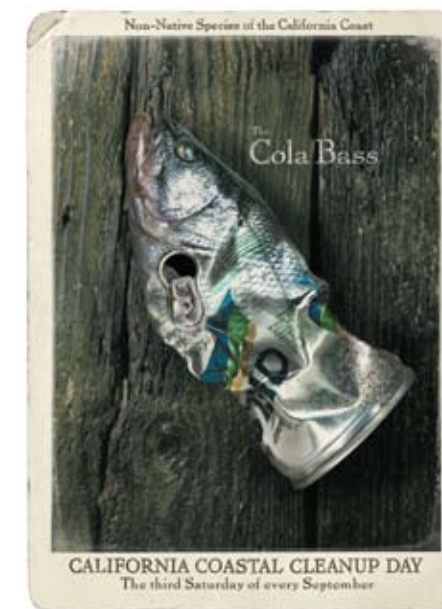
The  
Cig Egret

CALIFORNIA COASTAL CLEANUP DAY  
The third Saturday of every September



The  
Spork Crab

CALIFORNIA COASTAL CLEANUP DAY  
The third Saturday of every September



The  
Cola Bass

CALIFORNIA COASTAL CLEANUP DAY  
The third Saturday of every September

It's an old story. People have been talking about cleaning up Portland Harbor for years," begins a *Maine Sunday Telegram* feature story in 1968, written by a fresh-out-of-college waterfront reporter by the name of Lance Tapley.

The story refers to "scores" of oil spills in 1967 and to an article written in 1929—found in the newspaper's library—that describes an oil slick polluting the harbor. The 1968 story relates efforts by the Coast Guard and a recently founded group called the Portland Harbor Pollution Abatement Committee to move beyond just talking about cleaning up the harbor.

A Portland sewer treatment system, the story notes, was "a long way off." In 1968, all the city's human wastes poured unchecked into the harbor, Back Cove, and several streams.

Skip forward almost 40 years to the present: The city's plant on Munjoy Hill has been treating sewage since 1978, as has South Portland's Waterman Drive plant. Despite 400-plus tanker visits to the port each year, oil spills are now rare. Even a huge one in 1996, when the *Julie N* tore into the old Million Dollar Bridge, was contained and cleaned up well enough (at a cost of \$48 million) so that no ecological disaster occurred.

Continued on page 74

Artwork in this story is available as posters from the California Coastal Commission, a public education program in San Francisco whose mission is to protect, conserve, restore, and enhance environmental and human-based resources of the California coast and ocean for environmentally sustainable and prudent use by current and future generations. It was established by voter initiative in 1972 and later made permanent by the Legislature through adoption of the California Coastal Act of 1976. The Coastal Act includes specific policies that address issues such as shoreline public access and recreation, lower cost visitor accommodations, terrestrial and marine habitat protection, visual resources, landform alteration, agricultural lands, commercial fisheries, industrial uses, water quality, offshore oil and gas development, transportation, development design, power plants, ports, and public works. For more information, visit [www.coastal.ca.gov](http://www.coastal.ca.gov)





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### ■ CITY BEAT

Harbor, continued from page 35

## Truth at Low Tide

Gone are most of the waterfront's ancient, rotting wooden pilings that churned debris into the harbor with every tide. Volunteer cleanup crews now sweep over Portland's and South Portland's shores every September. Most summer days, Portland's East End Beach is free enough from bacteria to be swimmable. The oxygen level of harbor water is high enough to support abundant marine life.

Visiting cruise ships—some with passengers and crew totaling thousands—have very recently been forbidden to discharge any waste water in the harbor or bay. And watching the waters carefully are two professional groups, the Friends of Casco Bay and the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership—in addition to a squadron of local, state, and federal environmental officials.

But the cleanup of Portland Harbor is not yet accomplished. Most noteworthy, raw human waste still pours into the harbor whenever the volume of water in a rainstorm causes Portland's and South Portland's sewage to back up in the sewer pipes from the treatment plants. Of the 43 combined sewer and storm-water outfalls that existed in Portland in 1991, only 11 have been eliminated to date by the replacement of single pipes by pairs of pipes—one for sewage headed for treatment and one for runoff water.

## The Secret Storm

Considerable progress, though, has been made. In 1996, about two billion gallons of untreated sewage went into the harbor and nearby waters from Portland, South Portland, Cape Elizabeth, and Westbrook, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). In 2004, an estimated 600,000,000 gallons overflowed—a 70 percent drop.

But think of swimming in those 600,000,000 gallons! And as the outfall pipes feed water from everyday rain into the harbor and bay, they sweep along pesticides, herbicides, gasoline, motor oil, pet waste, and other toxic effluvia of modern life.

"The major source of pollution of the harbor has been the same, and it's storm water runoff," says the harbor's chief watchdog, Joe Payne, a 58-year-old bearded biologist whose job as "baykeeper" is to

investigate the local waters in his 26-foot *Bay Keeper* for the Friends of Casco Bay.

Not that there aren't other problems remaining. Studies have shown how much the harbor's mud bottom is composed of a "noxious mix," in Payne's words, of metals like lead and arsenic as well as cancer-causing hydrocarbons, the legacy of 150 years of unregulated dumping of industrial wastes from paint factories, tanneries, and foundries. Experts think the only thing that can be done with these sediments is to hope that they will be eventually well covered over with silt from the Fore River.

But the pipes that carry overflow sewage and the various poisons of civilization into the harbor remain the number-one environmentalist concern.

"It's 60 to 70 percent of where all water pollution comes from," Payne says.

The seven staffers of his 17-year-old group work to get this and other antipollution messages across to the public ([www.cascobay.org](http://www.cascobay.org)), with a \$625,000 budget and scores of volunteers who test water quality. One of its educational projects, called BayScaping, aims to lessen the use of lawn chemicals that find their way into the surrounding waters. In another project, a Friends' boat pumps out to a tank for safe removal the wastes from recreational craft—100,000 gallons in the past 10 years. In 1998, the group rescued 33,000 lobsters from the inner harbor, which was being dredged, paying lobstermen to trap and then release them out in the bay.

The other major environmentalist organization concerned with the port is the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership, a quasi-governmental group largely funded by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). It is run by a local board and headquartered at the University of Southern Maine's Muskie School of Public Service in Portland. Established in 1990, with a current budget of \$600,000, it is one of 28 estuary projects around the country that carry out the EPA's major nonregulatory effort for cleaner harbors. It is less activist than the Friends, but the Friends is one of the group's partners, which also include other activist organizations such as Friends of the Presumpscot River; local, state, and federal agencies; and businesses like Portland Yacht Services, which has helped in fighting invasive marine species.

Karen Young, 38, a toxicologist, is the Estuary Partnership's director. She

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## ■ CITY BEAT

In 1998, the Friends of Casco Bay rescued 33,000 lobsters from the inner harbor, which was being dredged, paying lobstermen to trap and then release them out in the bay.

believes there are other threats to the harbor—"oil is still a fairly significant risk," given how much goes through the port, much of it for a pipeline to Montreal. But she agrees with Payne that the sewage overflow during storms and the normal runoff through the sewers together create the biggest unresolved pollution problem for Portland Harbor and Casco Bay. Her group produces "State of the Bay" and other reports that can be read at [www.cascobayestuary.org](http://www.cascobayestuary.org).

Portland's mayor, James Cohen, describes the city's remaining "combined sewer overflows"—CSOs in public works lingo—as "one of the larger environmental challenges." Cohen, 41, an attorney, has a family connection to the port's cleanup: His mother, Jacki Cohen, is chairwoman of the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership's board.

The mayor calls the Clean Water Act's commandment to municipalities to clean up their sewer systems "the largest unfunded federal mandate out there." For Portland alone, he estimates, \$75 million still will have to be spent to meet the requirements of an agreement the city originally made with the DEP in the early 1990s, but that has been revised twice since. Expectations now are that the work won't be finished until around 2018; the city is seeking further revisions to its agreement because the feds have a new mandate: The city must prevent the most toxic storm water—even after all sewage has been removed—from flowing untreated to harbor and bay.

## Unfunded Mandate?

These projects have so far been entirely financed by municipal sewer charges. This is the reason city sewer rates are high, Cohen says: "They are double what people pay for water."

## Whose Harbor Is Cleanest?

Industrial waste, toxins, and untreated sewage estimated in harbors, in gallons, per year:

- **Puget Sound** (Seattle city limits only): 964,982
- **Boston Harbor** (Boston city limits only): 7.8 million
- **San Francisco Bay** (Oakland, San Francisco city limits only): 96 million
- **Portland Harbor**: 600 million
- **New York Harbor** (Metro NYC limits only): 1.04 billion

*Figures courtesy Environmental Protection Agency*

And the city gets "not a dime," he says, from federal or state agencies for this sizeable effort.

The state's DEP commissioner, David Littell, says he's willing to renegotiate the sewer cleanup deal with Portland, "but let's keep good, solid, consistent progress."

Littell bristles a little at Cohen's suggestion that cleaning up the sewer outflows is an unfunded mandate. Calling it this, he says, implies the city has the right to pollute.

Although Cohen has a green reputation and has created a "Sustainable Portland" task force that Littell, 39, a Portland resident, sits on, the mayor seems resigned to a long timeline for the remaining sewer reconstruction. He doesn't suggest any massive infusion of city funds. "We are financially struggling," he says of the city.

Littell comments that he sees no reason Portland couldn't put up some city tax money to move the process along.

"Government is reactive," Joe Payne observes, not too optimistically. "It reacts to citizen pressure."

Nevertheless, "Portland is in better shape than most of the harbors south of us," Payne says—not sounding, for a change, like the critic he is paid to be. "Almost everything is moving in the right direction."

Forty years after the founding of the Portland Harbor Pollution Abatement Committee, the harbor has come a long way in pollution abatement, although it'll take at least another dozen years to get to a really grand environmental destination.

So the old story continues, but for a long time now it has been more than talk. ■

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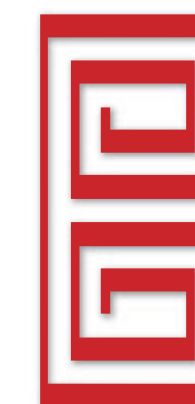
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