

Letter – A Silent Species

To the Editor

Your Winter 2008 issue prompted me to add my own account of that dreadful oil spill.

The day started early in the morning... fog was thick all night but dissipated quickly when the sun came up. Two Marine Biological Laboratory collectors were preparing to collect annelids (worms) to be used by scientists.

The truck left the laboratory for West Falmouth to catch the low ebb tide. The collectors noted in the log the pertinent information for the day.

Date: September 16, 1969

Time: 0800 departure

Tide: 0830 low tide

Species: Polychaetes, Nereis, Phyllodoce, Polydora

Environments: Marsh grass, marsh channel, creeks

The truck arrived at West Falmouth close to the marsh grass vicinity. In moments we were breathing the strongest smell of diesel fuel. Apparently, the odor was coming from the shore. We decided to put on hip boots and we picked up our clam rakes, buckets and shovels. Off we went across the meadow grass. Before we arrived at the collecting area our boots had become covered with sticky oil from walking through the marsh. The terrible scent indicated a non-healthy environment. We assumed the diesel fuel came in on the flood tide late the previous night and had spread over the marsh peat. Large populations of marsh mussels were hanging dead and fiddler crabs were floating in the oil.

We were stunned, hardly speaking, thinking of the thousands of years when nature designed beaches, marshes, tidal pools and the many species adapted to these environments.

It took over a quarter of a century before the diesel fuel appeared to be gone but traces of it are still apparent in the marsh. Thousands of tides have covered and uncovered this area during this time. Nature's purging has surpassed any effort that man could do to save the marsh.

John Valois
Woods Hole