



DISCUSSION GUIDE

SMALL TOWN, BIG OIL:

The Untold Story of the Women

Who Took on the Richest Man in the World – And Won

1. Were you surprised to learn about this battle for the Great Bay Region that played out fifty years ago? Had you heard anything about it previously?
2. How would the Seacoast region of New Hampshire and southern Maine have been changed had the Onassis oil terminal and refinery been built? Would it be a place you'd want to live, work, and recreate?
3. Who are the heroes in this story, and what were their different roles in defeating the proposed oil refinery?
4. Every good story needs some villains – do you think there were any in this story?
5. After reading **Small Town, Big Oil** and learning how a small grassroots group stood up to powerful political and business opponents, are you more inspired to take action to protect places you love? What could you do to help protect clean water, beautiful landscapes, and make our region more sustainable for future generations? There are lots of ideas in the *Great Bay Book Group Action Took Kit* to help you become an environmental champion.
6. Global geopolitics of the 1970s set the stage for the Onassis proposal – throughout the US, there was a shortage of petroleum and prices rose sharply due to the [OPEC oil embargo](#) of 1973. How did this corner of New Hampshire become embroiled in the politics of petroleum? Of all places in the Northeast, why do you think the Onassis team chose Durham Point as their preferred location for an oil refinery?
7. In the 1970s when this story took place, the Manchester Union Leader was New Hampshire's only daily newspaper. The book shows how Editor-in-Chief William Loeb wielded tremendous political power and used it aggressively to advance particular agendas, support his chosen candidates and demonize his opponents.

How is the politicization of the media similar or different from the media landscape today?

8. This story might have had a very different outcome if the Bennetts hadn't started Publick Occurrences with a commitment to covering local news. How did this newspaper's coverage differ from the Union Leader's? Do you feel there is a source of local news in our region today that is reliable and responsible?
9. Proponents of the oil refinery argued that opponents were engaging in NIMBY – Not In My Back Yard. They claimed that oil had to be refined somewhere so NH might as well reap the economic benefits. Did the project's defeat here simply push other communities – perhaps those with less political power – to suffer the same consequences that people in the Seacoast rejected?
10. Consider the many examples of sexism that the activists in this story faced. How did that impact each of the three women leaders – Nancy, Dudley, and Phyllis – at the time? Do you think attitudes and norms about women as activists and politicians have changed since then?
11. What made SOS – Save Our Shores - such an effective organization in the push-back against Olympic? Would such an organization be as successful today as it was in 1973-1974? How would tactics today be similar to or different from the tactics used 50 years ago?
12. What are the most serious environmental challenges we face today in the Seacoast Region? Are there lessons from this battle against big oil that we can use in confronting today's threats to our environment?
13. One of the central themes in this story is "home rule" - whether communities should have full control over land use decisions that impact them or whether the state should be able to override local opinion in service to regional or statewide needs. In this story, the Legislature agreed to abide by the wishes of the local community, a decision which was the death knell for the oil refinery. Do you think there are cases where the state should override local opinion?
14. Many proponents of the Onassis oil refinery framed the proposal as a choice between existence and beauty, between progress and going back to the dark ages. Are environmental issues today still framed in that same binary lens, or is there more of a sense that we can maintain a certain quality of life without polluting our communities and our planet?
15. Think of a few special places around the region that you particularly love – natural areas, parks, scenic views, places you recreate. With all the growth and development in the region over the past 50 years, would these places exist if people hadn't made efforts to protect them? Google a few of your favorite places and see what you can learn about who, how, and when they were protected. A few examples:

- Prescott Park and Creek Farm, Portsmouth
- Fort Foster and Rogers Park, Kittery
- New Castle Town Common
- Stratham Hill Park
- Sweet Trail, Durham and Newmarket
- Fox Point Park, Newington
- Wagon Hill Farm, Durham
- Hilton Park, Dover Point
- Swasey Park, Exeter

If you could, what would you say to the people who fought for these places for future generations to enjoy?

16. A huge amount of land has been permanently conserved in the Great Bay region in recent decades, an effort due in part to the battle against the Onassis oil refinery. Several local land trusts were started in the years following this story, and there was an influx of federal money and philanthropy to protect places that had previously been taken for granted. For example, local land trusts emerged across the region in the 1980s, the Great Bay National Estuarine Reserve was established in 1989, and the Great Bay National Wildlife Refuge in 1992. Have you visited any of these protected lands? What values do you think they provide to people, wildlife, water quality, and the quality of life in the Seacoast region?
17. Can you make parallels with other similar stories where a small grassroots group made a big difference for future generations?
18. What are the most important lessons that we can take from the Onassis oil refinery controversy that are relevant today?

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