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Exxon Valdez Oil Spill

Senior Biology

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Outline

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 - A. The Spill changed my hometown Cordova, Alaska, and family tremendously
 1. There has been no herring industry since, along with a great change of pink salmon
 2. My dad, uncles, and Grandpa were affected by oil spill through fishing loss
 - B. The sad chain of wildlife casualties
 1. Animals affected
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 - C. Parent's Role
 1. My mom went to Valdez to help with the clean up of wildlife
 2. My dad took the first scientists out to record the aftermath of the spill

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Exxon Valdez: Legacy of a tanker from hell

On Good Friday, March 24, 1989, the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground on a charted rock, Bligh Reef, in Prince William Sound, Alaska; releasing more than eleven million gallons of crude oil. It was the largest and most destructive spill in the United States.

It all began on Thursday, March 23, when the crew readied the 987' tanker for a 5 day run to Long Beach, CA. The tanker was the newest, and best equipped in Exxon's fleet, loaded with 1,264,164 barrels of North Slope Crude Oil. The spill could have been easily avoided, were it not for the carelessness of the crew. Harbor pilot Murphy said Captain Hazelwood left the bridge repeatedly - which is against company policy - but Murphy knew a harbor pilot never challenged a captain's command, so he said nothing. When Hazelwood came back, he could tell Hazelwood had been drinking, but Murphy thought he looked fit enough to take command. So at 11:20 p.m, Captain J. Hazelwood took control of the *Exxon Valdez*.

Meanwhile in Valdez, Gordon Taylor watched the orange sign of the *Exxon Valdez* disappear from radar, but he knew it was easy to lose sight of tankers off Bligh Island. In 1981 it had been strongly encouraged by the Valdez Coast Guard commander James Woodle, that their radar system be improved to ensure sharp vessel coverage between Bligh Island and the leading edge of the Columbia Glacier. But Coast Guard didn't act on Woodle's recommendation because it deemed the additional radar sites, at \$100,000 a year, to be "cost prohibitive."

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Another mistake on Hazelwood's part was that he didn't notify the Coast Guard when he left the traffic separation, and in one transmission he mistakenly identified his vessel as the *Exxon Baton Rouge*, along with his speech being slurred. Back at the Coast Guard station, Blanford failed to track the *Exxon Valdez* of danger, because he was said to be "moving paperwork around the room." Also, standard Coast Guard procedure says in the presence of danger, 2 officers must be on watch. But Hazelwood left an inexperienced second mate on watch, who was accelerating the *Exxon Valdez* between Bligh Reef and heavy ice flow. After the first impact, the tanker advanced 600 feet before it ground to a halt on Bligh Reef. Hazelwood didn't even try to back off the Reef, but instead ordered a hard right, then a hard left turn.

It was twenty-four hours before Exxon's first spray plane even arrived, causing the oil to spread much farther than what could have been. Frank Iarossi of Exxon said this: "It was pretty clear that this spill was way beyond the capability of any mechanical pickup, even if you mobilized all the equipment in the world. Meanwhile, the oil is spreading through Prince William Sound and we're wasting all this quiet weather debating whether or not we could use dispersant. Dr. Butler says it's like arguing whether to use water to put out a fire while a house is burning. That's exactly what we were doing" (In the Wake, 46). What made things worse, was that there was a big spring blizzard 4 days after the spill, which caused the oil to spread farther than necessary.

This spill was the largest in U.S history and tested the abilities of local, national, and industrial organizations to prepare for, and respond to, a disaster of such magnitude.

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My hometown, Cordova, Alaska, was one of the hardest hit fishing towns in Prince William Sound. One of my mom's friends describes Cordova as being "like a funeral," said Marilyn Leland, "after the spill everyone came to the union hall. They brought doughnuts, cakes, meat, and cheese. Everyone wanted to do something" (In the Wake, 99). My mom and dad describe what it was like meeting in the high school gym listening to what the Exxon's spokesman Don Cornett had to say. They remember Cornett repeatedly reassuring everyone that Exxon will come through and that they will make the sound whole once more. Here is a response made by Cornett to Cordova: "Exxon and you won't have a problem. I don't care if you believe that or not. That's the truth. You have had some good luck and you don't realize it. You have Exxon. And we do business straight" (In the Wake, 100).

Well, whatever he meant by "straight" didn't exactly follow through to say the least. The state and federal governments reached a settlement with Exxon in 1991, that Exxon would pay \$900 million settlement through a 10 year period. In a separate class action lawsuit brought by 40,000 fishermen and other parties damaged by the oil, a 1994 jury decided Exxon's conduct was reckless and awarded \$5 billion, the largest punitive damages ever. This case is still under appeal.

The people and economies of communities in the oil spill area suffered tremendously in the months and years following the spill. Commercial fishing and tourism were especially affected. An example for commercial fishing, would be that fishing permits have gone down extremely in value. A salmon seine permit that sold for

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\$300,000 in 1989 is now worth \$30,000.

To many in Cordova, it's more than an oil spill, the world's largest oil corporation, and our small town of Cordova. It's about America's failed justice system. It seems the system will not work for many towns in America with class action lawsuits, such as: hurricane Katrina, 9/11, or oil spills such as *Exxon Valdez*. Many in Cordova wonder how our legal system no longer brings about justice. Riki Ott asks the question "When did "punitive" stop meaning to punish? If the original punitive award of \$5 billion was sufficient to change corporate behavior why was Exxon the last corporation to double hull its oil tankers to reduce risk of future spills rather than the first?" (Sound Truth). Also, Joseph Hazelwood was convicted in 1990 of negligently discharging oil. (just a mere 11 million gallons!) After lengthy appeals in 1998 he was ordered to begin 1000 hours of unpaid work service in Anchorage and pay a \$50,000 fine. He was also ordered to clean oily rocks as part of his misdemeanor sentence, but that demand was set aside.

Why shouldn't Exxon be responsible to pay for cleaning up their own mess, pay the penalties for broken laws, attempt recovery for victims, and pay punitive damages? If Exxon does "their business straight," (Cornett) why have they not taken responsibility like a respectable corporation? The spill as a whole created a gigantic mess, and broke a lot of federal laws. So it's not that surprising to find out that Exxon paid \$2.5 billion for its cleanup and another \$1 billion for penalties. But it may surprise those who live outside of Alaska that taxpayers, not Exxon, paid the majority of the bill.

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This is part of my town's reality: 3 of Cordova's five fish canneries went bankrupt after the spill; we lost the only locally owned and operated processing cooperative; leaving fishermen without it's ranking as one of the top ten seaports in the nation, to spill-related pink salmon and herring population collapse in 1992 - 1993.

Although I was not alive to experience this disaster firsthand, I have been greatly affected by it through: the impact it left on my family's jobs, how it has forever changed the precious wildlife in Prince William Sound, and overall how Exxon has carelessly stolen so much through reckless behavior. Guess who is the 17th largest economy in the world today? Even ahead of the country Switzerland, Exxon Mobil. Exxon's 2005 sales totaled \$371 billion, which exceeds Indonesia's GDP, the fourth most populated country in the world. In February of 2006, they yielded the largest yearly profit ever made by a U.S company, with an amount of \$36.13 billion, increasing 42% from 2004, thanks to consistently high oil prices. Since Exxon is so wealthy, you'd think they would pay off it's environmental debts that it was solely responsible for 18 years ago, since it was the worst man-made environmental disaster in U.S history.

Exxon has been appealing the original judgment and in December, 2006, a federal appeals court cut in half the \$5 billion jury award for punitive damages. The case remains still tied up in appeals and Exxon refuses to pay a penny - I must say, it sure is a good thing that as Cordovan's we had "good luck on our side that we weren't even aware of!"- In response to this jury decision, a defender of Exxon says that the Valdez environmental disaster was "a problem that's long passed."

