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Exxon Valdez Oil Spill

Senior Biology

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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."

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Regardless of how much Exxon should rightly pay for it's mistakes, I think one thing must be done: the American people should take a stand against Exxon's continued pressure for opening the Arctic (National) Wildlife Refuge. Since Exxon has obviously shown a lack of good corporate and environmental responsibility to say the least, it is most definitely inappropriate for them to have any dealings whatsoever with new oil revenue possibilities in Alaska. *up, 2007*

Exxon Mobil has also argued that they should not be forced to pay "hefty punitive damages because it had already spent billions of dollars to compensate for losses and fund cleanup efforts, (although these "efforts" conveniently seemed to fit nicely coming from tax payers wallets). The PIRG spokesman Zack Brown said: "It's outrageous that Exxon Mobil, the most profitable oil company in the world, is getting a break in penalties for the largest oil spill in history, Prince William Sound is still feeling the negative impacts of this tragedy nearly 18 years later, while Exxon Mobil is bringing record profits." Exxon has repeatedly stated that the environment in Prince William Sound "is healthy, robust and thriving, based on scientific reviews." But these "reviews" are anything but truthful. Exxon scientists did not conduct any comprehensive studies comparable to the public-trust studies on seabirds and marine mammals. Exxon scientists reported most of the species they studied either increased or did not change overtime (in other words, their habitat went virtually unchanged throughout the spill). Exxon violated a basic assumption of their own study design, they assumed birds would choose not to return to heavily oiled colonies and beaches when, in fact, many birds died from this.

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Violating this basic assumption made their conclusions totally invalid. The flaws in Exxon's surveys became more obvious with time, as the public-trust scientists documented huge declines in bird abundance from an unnatural cause. In the decade since the *Exxon Valdez* collided, the nation's largest oil spill has been distilled into a series of calculations: crude oil spilled (11.2 million gallons), coastline oiled (1300 miles), birds dead (250,000), oil recovered (12%), criminal penalty exacted by jury (\$5 billion, under appeal).

So much is beyond measure though, how do you measure the value of an otter, a fouled beach, or a lifestyle forever lost? Humanity is not included on the list of species damaged by the oil spill, so the question of whether Prince William Sound will ever recover will continue to go unanswered, while the villain of the story reaps billions of dollars of corporate profits. Scientists continue to struggle with difficult questions, with the ecosystems changing in the Gulf of Alaska, how does one differentiate between shifts of climate and food resources, and what is from the spill? In Sherry Simpson's article in *Alaska Geographic*, she says this: "The passage of time has rendered the events of the oil spill more perplexing than ever. Once it seemed simple to identify the heroes, the villains, the victims. But the smudge of complicity lingers, shared by a ship's crew that faltered at the helm, the companies and agencies that did too little and much too late, the watchdogs who failed to watch, the citizens distracted by easy money, and the consumers who demanded more, more, and more."

Although the oil spill was Exxon's fault, so much could have been done to

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prevent the catastrophic disaster. The disastrous lack of immediate and effective response demonstrated the need for more use of local resources, better communication, and a more effective decision making process. In 1990, the Oil Pollution Act was passed, which enacted many improvements in oil transport operations. Also, my dad helps every couple months with practicing spill drills, in case another incident should occur.

Exxon continues to naively say that everything is back to normal, but everything is not. For example, since the spill my dad has not been able to fish for herring, which had been 50% of our yearly income, and that was in 1989. If you examine what those numbers could mean for just fishermen as a whole, Exxon has a lot to make up for that they never will. Another example is pink salmon, although my dad still fishes for pinks only every other year is a "good" year from the way it once was. Fishermen were paid \$1 per pound for pink salmon before the spill, and 5 cents a pound after the spill. Even if Exxon did miraculously pay for the punitive damages, it would not come close to making up just for lost income.

Recently this year, terrible decisions have been made. The Supreme Court will now hear Exxon Mobil's reasons to void the \$2.5 billion punitive award in the *Exxon Valdez* case. The second blow was the Supreme Court's decision to not even hear our reasons why the award should be restored to the full \$5 billion that a jury of peers decided was less than fair back in 1994. While the media assumes many untruths, lawyers, and scholars "play the Supreme Court's decisions back and forth like a ping-pong ball," says Ricki Ott. While people of Cordova share a completely different view; it's not about

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whether the Supreme Court hears our case or not, it's about justice and "making us whole," a promise Exxon made to my community 5 days after the spill.

But much has been done since 1989 to address the factors leading to the disaster. New and revised federal and state laws and regulations are now in better order, and the oil industry operates with a more heavy awareness of what could possibly happen again. The Exxon spill could have been prevented by stronger prevention and planning. The first 3 days after the spill, there was nearly ideal weather for oil recovery, but equipment wasn't ready. While ten years later, only 2 of the 28 species and resources injured by the spill have been declared "recovered." For example, Sound herring and pink salmon in PWS spawn in intertidal areas and are vulnerable to spilled oil. The herring which spawned in 1988, were juveniles when the oil spill hit, they were expected to dominate the population.

The *Exxon Valdez* was not just some freak accident, the oil industry failed to maintain adequate systems for preventing spills, the regulatory agencies failed to protect public resources because of ineffective oversight, the state and federal officials failed to pass strong enough laws to protect our environment, and except for a few outspoken local citizens, many Alaskan's just failed to pay enough attention. Although Prince William Sound is safer then it was 18 years ago, continued awareness is key to preventing another catastrophic disaster.

The Exxon Valdez oil spill affects me personally in many ways. The spill has forever changed my hometown Cordova, Alaska, and family. The herring industry is

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completely nonexistent, and pink salmon took a damaging affect also, affecting tremendously the lives of my commercial fishermen family of my dad, 3 uncles, and grandpa. Another sad thought to consider, is that around 30% of the fishermen who were owed money by Exxon have passed away since, one being my grandpa.

Another mistake by Exxon was that Frank Iarossi of Exxon believed Exxon was doing an adequate job of cleaning up, but DEC commissioner Dennis Kelso viewed that Exxon's mobilization obscured the real issue-the actual condition of the beaches. "Exxon should get credit for having mobilized a lot of equipment, but they weren't using it effectively. Very early in the response, Exxon started its list of lists. Their daily reports list all of flurry of numbers which is becoming a full-blown blizzard. We've instead of looking at the condition of the shoreline, we're getting numbers of vessels, numbers of people, claims about numbers of barrels of oil recovered", says Dennis Kelso (In the Wake, 57).

Meanwhile, globs of oil-soaked debris, barely recognizable as birds, began coming ashore. Cormorants, auklets, and ducks were coated when they dove into the sea to feed. Eagles ingested oil as they fed upon weakened creatures. Spring migrations of geese, swans, and shorebirds had just begun. Sea otters were suddenly finding their clear waters black, thick, and deadly. The crude oil stung sea otter's eyes and lungs, as they would try to stay afloat. Many otters swam to exhaustion and drowned. Along the shores, deer grazed on oil-stained seaweed and grass. Bears coming from hibernation were seen scavenging blackened birds and otters washed up on beaches.

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The great chain affect of this disaster is sickening. My mom has explained to me how hard it was to see what the crude oil did to all the wildlife in PWS, being an animal lover like myself, how the crude oil affected animals was especially hard to write about. My dad said that on the first Friday of the spill, Jack Lamb-a tender man-and thirty other fishermen had stood ready with their boats to help with anything. Although they kept waiting to hear from Exxon, they were completely ignored, because Exxon felt they had everything under control.

I'm proud to say that my parents both played effective roles in the cleanup. My mom went to Valdez, and says this about her experience: "The main centers for wildlife rescue and cleaning of oiled birds and mammals were in Valdez and Seward. A group of us went from Cordova to Valdez to help in the efforts. It was a difficult and heart-breaking task. The animals were so frightened and suffering from the effects of crude oil all over their bodies. There were sea otters, many types of water fowl and bald eagles to name a few. Dawn detergent was found to do the best job helping to remove the oil. Many of the animals didn't survive" (Pam Wiese). My dad was asked to take the first researchers from NOAA on a 4 week investigation out in the Sound. In Riki Ott's book "Sound Truth.," she writes about Jeff Short (whose book is the Oil Spill Symposium 18) and Pat Harris going out on my dad's boat and witnessing the tragedy: "One week later Short and Pat Harris were in the Sound with a fishing boat charter arranged by CDFU. They witnessed what few others did--the huge slick moving through the Sound. Short (1998) recalled, "Northwest Bay (Eleanor Island) stank to high heaven--there was oil

