

Radio Program: KTOO  
Living on Earth  
Exxon Valdez Spill 5th Anniversary Special

Steve Kerwood - Five years ago this month, supertanker, Exxon Valdez, hit a ledge in Alaska's Prince William Sound and dumped 11 million gallons of crude oil into the sea. Within days, 1200 miles of coastline had been ravaged. Thousands of birds and other animals had been killed and the spill had permanently imprinted itself in American culture as one of our most infamous unnatural disasters. Today, we examine the legacy of the worst oil spill in U.S. history from several perspectives. In our first report, Steve Heimel of the Alaska Public Radio Network examines the long-term impact on the ecology of Prince William Sound.

Steve Heimel - Talk to a hundred people who know Prince William Sound and you'll hear about a hundred Prince William Sounds. It is so large that if you are in a sailboat, you have to plan on a trip of more than a week if you want to see more than a small part of it. If you are a kayaker like Ray Kimisa, every cove is or was its own adventure.

Ray Kimisa - It's unique. No other place in the world is like it. It's wonderful and beautiful but I've seen changes. Everybody can tell you that the otter population has declined. You use to see rafts of 40 to 60 otters at a time just laying together as the tide goes out and they'd be floating together in the fog, and they would look like a mass of dead trees until they'd float right up on you. But those are gone. You don't see those rafts of otters anymore. When the tide would come in against the glacier, there'd be hundreds of seals piled up on the ice. Those seals aren't there like they use to be in the numbers. Use to have a lot of porpoise, and I don't see them anymore.

Steve Heimel - Anyone who knew Prince William Sound before the oil spill says it's different now. While logging plans and a booming fishery had already begun to change the Sound in 1989, the black wave of death from the tanker brought a transformation unlike anything anyone could imagine. Whipped by the storm into ribbons of toxic foam, the oil killed masses of animals outright and many more by its lingering effects. Government researchers estimate, for instance, that the sea otter population, where the oil hit, went down by 35% in two years. Other marine mammals also suffered, as well as huge numbers of sea birds. The oil killed cormorants, gulls, kittiwakes, marbled murrelets, but above all murre. Far more than half the animals killed were murre--a diving bird that lives in dense colonies. Hundreds of thousands of murre were killed and while many survived--in some colonies, not enough to hold the group together to breed. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, Vernon Bird.

Vernon Bird - There seems to be safety in numbers. A big cluster of murre seem to be able to defend against say a gull or raven probably better than a single murre could, and they will sometime abandon their egg--make it real susceptible to gull predation but once

everybody's layed, the birds that are incubating tend to sit real tight even if an airplane flies over lots of times or a predator.

Steve Heimel - Murre colonies in the Barren Islands south of Prince William Sound in the Gulf of Alaska had near complete reproductive failure for at least two years. That's the government view. Scientists hired by the Exxon Corporation to research the same issue saw it very differently. Biologist, John Weens, calls the idea that any colonies were in danger an exaggeration.

John Weens - That really wasn't the case at all, and those statements were really very premature. They came before any kind of carefully planned studies had been conducted.

Steve Heimel - Counts done by an Exxon-funded researcher in 1991 showed murrees to be at about the same densities as ever in the stressed colonies. Government scientists say that report is flawed but in any event after looking at the latest surveys, Vernon Bird concedes that common murrees are now out of danger. The dispute over the murrees illustrates a chronic problem with research on the spill's impacts. From the very beginning, it's been a big money game. The prospect of huge court judgments sent scientist out to look for damage or to look for proof of no damage. In 1991, Exxon settled the state and federal governments' court cases for \$900 million dollars but scientific damage assessments will still be critical to claims due to be taken to trial this summer by fishermen, Natives and others. But now research money is getting scare again. The Trustee Council of six federal and state agency heads set up to administer the \$900 million dollar settlement has cut off a lot of research so it would have more money to invest in restoring and protecting the environment that sustains the wildlife that survives--buying up habitat threatened by logging and minimizing the impact of growing public use of the spill environment. Bob Spies is the Trustees' chief scientific advisor.

Bob Spies - I know we spent over a \$100 million dollars in scientific studies. That's a tremendous amount of resources, and I am not sure that the will is there to keep pursuing these things--pursuing these questions.

Steve Heimel - Still it appears that some of the research was shut down prematurely. The number of harlequin ducks, animals who spend their whole life cycle in the kinds of intertidal areas where the oil was trapped, fell unexpectedly last year after the Council decided to stop funding annual duck surveys. Also last year, the herring run came back severely impaired by disease and in small numbers. This after the Trustees had decided no herring damage could be connected to the spill, and it told scientists to close down their study. Now correlations are being shown between herring damage and the spill. The run of pink salmon, the big money fish in Prince William Sound, crashed disastrously last summer as well. Fishermen strongly believe the spill is responsible although the links that scientist can make are tenuous. Head scientist, Bob Spies, and the Trustees now say they are all in favor of continuing to pay to investigate those links. For those who draw their livelihoods from Prince William Sound, the five years since the spill have been economically

turbulent. There was massive spending in a clean-up effort and two years of very good fishing but now the fishing has crashed, and tour operators worry that fifth anniversary publicity about the spill will make the public think Prince William Sound is a waste land. Sail charter operator, Nancy Lethcoe, says it's nowhere near that simple.

Nancy Lethcoe - The spill was an overwhelming traumatic impact on the Sound but also on us. Whereas, when our charter guests come, they don't have the memories and they don't have the knowledge, and they have pure enjoyment of what they see. So the Sound is very, very much alive and living for them, and for us it's recovering and as it's recovering, we're recovering.

Steve Heimel - In Alaska for Living on Earth, I'm Steve Heimel.

Steve Kerwood - Five years after the Exxon Valdez disaster, those who live close to Alaska's southern coastline are still contending with oil in their environment. Not long ago, a Native fisherman picked up a lump of oil tar the size of a basketball. Many of the region's Native people known as the Chugach Aliiuts have been slowly recovering from the economic, social and culture disruption of the spill. But as producer, Susan Kerness, found in a visit to several Native villages, the recovery masked some profound changes in their way of life.

Susan Kerness - This small hamlet, the island of Chenega Bay in Prince William Sound, resembles an unpaved suburban neighborhood. The basic transportation is a modified dune buggy and the closest store is a \$100 plane ride away. For the Chugach Aliiuts who live here, both their survival and cultural identity depend on harvesting and sharing food from the ocean, but that changed suddenly on Good Friday 1989.

Phil Totemoff - Before the oil spill, you could see right out to the rocks out there. There use to be seals on those rocks on low tide just about on every low tide, but now there's nothing--nothing at all.

Susan Kerness - Phil Totemoff is a Chugach Aliiut elder who's lived in Prince William Sound all his life. In his younger days, he divided his time between subsistence fishing and commercial fishing. That was when he lived in old Chenega before another Good Friday disaster, the 1964 earthquake and tidal wave, destroyed his entire village 25 years earlier. The black sludge that coated new Chenega's subsistence beaches five days after the tanker ran aground gave Totemoff a disturbingly familiar feeling.

Phil Totemoff - I survived the 1964 earthquake, you know, and it just reminds me a little bit more of what happened during the '64 earthquake after I'd seen all that oil.

Susan Kerness - Chenega Bay residents still hunt seals and ducks but they aren't finding as many as they did before 1989, and they have to travel farther to get them. So for many here, it's becoming too expensive to put Native food on their tables. The oil took a week

longer to foul the shores of Nanwalek, about two hundred miles southwest of Chenega Bay but it brought similar problems. Sally Ash grew up in Nanwalek and now teaches village kids sikpiak, their Native language. She was living in Anchorage in 1989 and when she realized the magnitude of the disaster, she rushed home to be with her family and to help clean her beaches. She found Nanwalek a very different place than she left.

Sally Ash - It seemed so weird to come home to this quiet little village. It use to be quiet, and now all of sudden all kinds of people are coming in. I mean, you couldn't really keep track, you know. It was just so noisy.

Susan Kerness - Her village of less than 200 had been invaded by dozens of clean-up workers. She says they took over Nanwalek's community hall, usurping the authority of the tribal council. Ash says the influx of outsiders combined with a sudden infusion of cash into a largely non-cash economy turned her community's social and economic structure on its head.

Sally Ash - We are not use to probably having money all at once. I think it caused a lot of people to start drinking again. That was the sad part and then not doing your subsistence that summer we missed out on a whole summer of no food, and things seemed just kind of out of control or something.

Gail Evanoff - I always say Mother Nature is mad. She doesn't know how to deal with this.

Susan Kerness - Today the crowds and the money are gone. What remains now is the oil. Chenega Corporation vice president, Gail Evanoff, gets angry when she hears scientist say that the human role in the clean up is over, and the best way to treat subsurface oil on shorelines is to allow Alaska's winter storms to scour them clean. She and other Native leaders are demanding that money from an Exxon out-of-court settlement be used for further beach clean up and monitoring.

Gail Evanoff - You and I know water and oil do not mix. When it's in the sediments, it's there to stay unless it's removed.

Susan Kerness - It almost doesn't matter whether it will take more human effort or natural wave action to heal the ecosystem. The fact is village residents like Phil Totemoff no longer trust the environment they've relied on for centuries.

Phil Totemoff - A lot of times when I get my food like seal and set it on the table, I could visualize that oil that I seen, and sometimes it makes me sick.

Susan Kerness - Still the shock waves from the Exxon Valdez disaster haven't been all bad. Port Graham village chief, Eleanor McMullen, says the spill revived interest in the old ways. Ways that she grew up learning from her grandmother.

Eleanor McMullen - The Exxon disaster revived a lot of Native cultural things--dance, song, building of the kayak, the language, and people have built on it.

Susan Kerness - But whether the children playing today in Chenega Bay will experience their subsistence culture as part of daily life or just as something they do on the weekends remains to be seen. Larry Evanoff is the mayor of Chenega Bay.

Larry Evanoff - I think we lost a generation of folks here. These young ones that are coming up now, they don't know how to hunt. Yeah, we try to take them out and tell them the way it use to be and what it was and how plentiful it was. That part of it is gone.

Susan Kerness - Like many adults who lived through both Good Friday disasters in Prince William Sound, Evanoff isn't so sure his village can bounce back a second time.

Larry Evanoff - We fell off the horse before. We got up and got back on. When we're going to get our lifestyle back--who knows. I might not see it in my lifetime.

Susan Kerness - For Living on Earth, I'm Susan Kerness in Chenega Bay, Alaska.

Steve Kerwood - There are certain historical events that sear themselves into our minds so thoroughly that we never forget where we were and how we felt when we heard the news. For many Alaskans including commentator, Nancy Lord, the wreck of the Exxon Valdez was one of them.

Nancy Lord - Five years ago Easter weekend, I was home from an out-of-town job. The weather had turned toward mud-softened spring, and all was right with the world. Good Friday morning my radio clicked on right into the middle of the news--a tanker hemorrhaging oil in Prince William Sound impaled on a reef I had never even heard of. That morning I felt only a numbing defeat that all the promises in the world hadn't kept us safe from the big spill. Little did I suspect the magnitude of the horrors that would follow. Otters scratching out their eyes. Pyres of burning bird carcasses. The incomprehensible activity of thousands of people hand wiping individual rocks. The corporate lying and bureaucratic dithering. Never, never could I have imagine that that unleashed oil would spread and multiple and eventually wash up on our own beach in sticky globs 400 miles from the grounding. EVOS, the Exxon Valdez oil spill acronym that became a word, was our wake up call. Those of us in the oil's path learned very quickly about the vulnerability of the marine life we had so long taken for granted. Clearly, we couldn't depend on the oil industry or the government nor could we rely on experts, those scientists who insisted the oil would never leave the Sound and couldn't possibly sink. We learned to trust ourselves--our own eyes and experience, to listen to one another and accept the collective knowledge of those who best knew and most valued what was at risk. No longer was it just conservationists crying the alarms. Commercial fishermen, subsistence users, city mayors, everyone saw the connections between environmental health and economic health. We joined together in common purpose and continued to work together as never before--

educating, advocating, litigating, insisting on habitat and resource protection, and that's good because the work still to be done is nearly overwhelming and often painfully discouraging. Five years after EVOS, open any newspaper. In the one before me, I read that another fully-loaded tanker lost power in Cook Inlet. It's lucky the anchor held because there still aren't any escort tugs in this part of Alaska. At about the same time, a thousand gallons of fuel spilled into Port Valdez when barge tanks overflowed during loading, and in the state capitol, lawmakers under the heady influence of oil industry campaign contributions were busy undoing protective laws adopted in the EVOS aftermath. That's right. That's happening as I speak. Apparently, not everyone woke up. Some just rolled over and went back to sleep.

Steve Kerwood - Commentator, Nancy Lord, is a writer who lives in Homer, Alaska. What do you think about the Exxon Valdez disaster? Give us a call at 1-800-218-9988 or write to Living on Earth at Box 639, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02238. The immediate wake of the Exxon Valdez tragedy did make some national changes. In 1990, Congress passed the Oil Pollution Prevention Act, which among other things requires double hulls on new tankers and rapid response teams to be on constant stand-by alert for spills. Late last year such teams passed their first real test when workers quickly contained a 100,000 gallon spill just off some of Puerto Rico's most famous beaches. But for some, the threat of massive oil spills has changed little. Eric Naulder, a Pulitzer prize-winning reporter for The Seattle Times, has ridden a supertanker out of Valdez and written a book about his experience. He says better clean-up capacity isn't really the answer.

Eric Naulder - The improvement of clean-up capacity--the building of more skimmers--it's kind of a futile gesture because once you get about a million gallons of oil in the water, there's almost nothing you can do to control it.

Steve Heimel - If the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 had been enforced before the Exxon Valdez set sail on that fateful day, would the outcome have been any different?

Eric Naulder - I don't think so. No. The ship itself would have today, as it still has today, had only a single hull. The ship actually hit the rocks with such force, a double hull, which is required in this act, might not have made a difference anyway. There isn't really anything in the regulation that would have changed the way the crew operates.

Steve Heimel - I spent a good while going through your book, and I came away from this that you must have the opinion that really no tanker really is safe enough. Is that a fair assessment?

Eric Naulder - It's a fair assessment. I mean anytime you are carrying that much oil. In this case, the ship I was aboard was carrying 35 million gallons of oil. Other tankers carry much more than that. You've got a potential for accidents or spills or major spills. You know, as I say in the book, a world that guzzles 30 thousand gallons of oil a second, makes no peace with any shoreline, including our own. I think between the time of the

Exxon Valdez accident in March of 1989 and the ride that I took aboard an oil tanker for this book which was in January of 1992, worldwide there were some 84 tankers that spilled large amounts of oil--a total of 65 million gallons of oil. In sounding as pessimistic as I do here, it's not to say we can't do better. In fact, there are many, many things we can do that would go much farther in preventing spills.

Steve Heimel - Alright give us some examples, please.

Eric Naulder - Well, I think one of the most important is to take a look at and make changes in the way we operate these ships. A vast majority of accidents at least involve or begin with human error. The crews of these vessels ought to be checked out by regulators on the vessel they are operating--just the way they do with airplane crews. That doesn't happen in the world of ships. I think also the ships need to be better built. Starting just after World War II, the owners of these oil tankers built larger ships with proportionately less steel, and frankly they were fragile ships. You really learn something, and I did on this vessel. When you ride an oil tanker into the teeth of a 70 mile-an-hour wind and into 40-foot seas, you think that you're on a vessel being 900 to 1000 feet long that is very powerful that is not vulnerable to nature until you meet something like that. As you stand on the bridge, you can see the ship bending--bending like a twig up and down against the force of these waves, and the sound of the ship groaning is a terrible, terrible sound. I mean, you literally can hear the ship in pain, all of the joints grinding. I tell the story of one ship that was hammered by a 90-foot wave and cracked down the side, spilling nearly a million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Alaska. This happens all the time, and the industry literally watched this happen for decades and continued to reduce the steel in these ships, and nobody really paid attention to the carnage until recently when they are starting to do studies and saying, "Hey, wait a minute. These ships seem to be breaking apart in the waves. Maybe we'd better build them a little differently." But the rules are still not good enough.

Steve Heimel - Eric Naulder is a reporter for The Seattle Times and author of the new book, Tankers Full of Trouble. Thanks very much for talking with us.

Eric Naulder - Well thank you very much. I've enjoyed it.

Steve Kerwood - And for this week, that's Living on Earth. Our program is produced and edited by Peter Thompson and directed by Debra Stavrough. The coordinating producer is George Holmsy and our production team includes Kim Mobaluski, Chris Page, Jan Nunley, Jessica Balamira, Eve Stewart and engineer, Laurie Zaria. Special thanks this week to member stations, KBBI in Homer, Alaska and KUOW in Seattle. Our theme music was composed by Michael Aaron. Living on Earth is a project of the World Media Foundation in cooperation with the Public Media Foundation and WBUR-Boston. I'm Steve Kerwood, executive producer.

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