

EDITED BY STEVEN BIEL

AMERICAN DISASTERS

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York and London

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
American disasters / edited by Steven Biel.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8147-1345-9 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 0-8147-1346-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Disasters—United States. 2. Disasters—Social aspects—United States. 3. Disasters—United States—Psychological aspects. 4. National characteristics, American. 5. United States—Social conditions. 6. United States—History—Anecdotes. I. Biel, Stephen, 1960-
E179 .A494 2001
973—dc21 2001004145

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper,
and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



New York University Press • New York and London

The Day the Water Died

The Exxon Valdez Disaster and Indigenous Culture

Duane A. Gill and J. Steven Picou

Alaska Natives were devastated by the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989. The spill destroyed more than economic resources; it shook the core cultural foundations of Native life. Alaska Native subsistence culture is based on an intimate relationship with the environment. Not only does the environment have sacred qualities for Alaska Natives; Natives' very survival depends on the preservation of the ecosystem and the maintenance of cultural norms of subsistence. Duane A. Gill and J. Steven Picou discuss the consequences the spill had for Native people in terms of subsistence, cultural traditions, and psychosocial well-being.

The excitement of the season had just begun, and then, we heard the news, oil in the water, lots of oil killing lots of water. It is too shocking to understand. Never in the millennium of our tradition have we thought it possible for the water to die, but it's true.

—Chief Walter Meganack¹

ON MARCH 24, 1989, the largest oil spill in North American history occurred when the supertanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska. Within three hours of the grounding, the tanker lost more than 10 million gallons of Prudhoe Bay crude oil. The accident was exacerbated by lack of pre-

paredness and inadequate response. After a three-day period of calm seas during which no significant oil containment or recovery occurred, a violent storm broke up the massive slick, and oil soon washed ashore on the western edge of Prince William Sound. Oil then drifted and spread southwest along the Kenai Peninsula, up Cook Inlet, into the Gulf of Alaska, around Kodiak Island, and along the Aleutian Peninsula. In all, more than 1,300 miles of rugged Alaskan coastline and 10,000 square miles of coastal seas were oiled.²

There is no good place to have an oil spill, but Prince William Sound has to be one of the worst. Described as one of the two most beautiful places on earth,³ the Sound is characterized by a 2,000-mile shoreline of bays, fjords, islands, and tidewater glaciers. The area is accented by a mountain landscape covered by a temperate rainforest. The region's ecosystem is rich and diverse, supporting an abundance of birds, fish, marine mammals, and wildlife.

Prince William Sound's ecosystem was the first to suffer the effects of the oil spill. Early spring in Alaska signals the beginning of a season of high biological activity. As a result, many birds, animals, and fish were exposed to oil during various stages of migration and reproduction. The initial casualty list included more than 300,000 birds, 3,500 sea otters, 300 harbor seals, 15 killer whales, and an unknown number of young fish.⁴

Cleanup techniques such as pressurized hot water and chemical treatments worsened the disaster by destroying microorganisms that form the base of the ecosystem's food chain. The ecological devastation was so great that ten years after the spill, only two of twenty-four affected animal species (bald eagle and river otter) had been declared "recovered."⁵ Among the twenty-four species, seven (including black oystercatchers and common loons) were listed as "recovery unknown" and eight (including killer whales, harbor seals, and Pacific herring) were listed as "not recovering."⁶ Although some species (for example, harbor seals) were experiencing problems prior to the spill, the disaster exacerbated their decline.

The ecological destruction also had profound effects on human communities, especially those dependent on renewable natural resources such as fish.⁷ Commercial fishing communities in oiled areas experienced disruptions within the fishing industry that, in some places, continued almost a decade after the spill.⁸ Although many fishermen made money from the cleanup, all have suffered from the

decline in the commercial fishing economy. According to Bob von Steinberg, "Since the spill, the value of fishing permits have plummeted, effectively destroying the collateral and equity of most fishermen. Hundreds have quit the business. As many as half of the 700 boats in Cordova's port have been idle in recent seasons. In 1987, the Cordova fleet landed 70 million pounds of fish worth \$60 million in current dollars; that fell to 59 million pounds worth \$26 million in 1997."⁹ The damage to economic resources reverberated throughout the community, affecting commercial fishermen, cannery workers, and other industry-related groups.

Of all groups touched by the disaster, in many ways Alaska Natives were most affected. The disaster damaged more than economic resources; it attacked subsistence, the defining characteristic linking modern Natives to their traditional culture. Not only does the environment have sacred qualities for Alaska Natives; their cultural survival depends on a healthy ecosystem and maintaining subsistence norms and values. The spill threatened the well-being of the environment, disrupted subsistence harvests, and severely impaired Alaska Natives' sociocultural milieu.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Historically, Prince William Sound was a melting pot of various Alaska Native groups, including Eskimos, Aleuts, Athapaskans, Eyaks, and Tlingits.¹⁰ Through centuries of group succession, trade, intermarriage, and warfare, a distinct group, Alutiiq, emerged to dominate the region. Villages were located along coastal areas with a high confluence of fish, marine mammals, and wildlife.

The abundance of renewable natural resources and the development of harvest techniques gave rise to a subsistence culture that persisted for several millennia prior to Western contact. Since contact, however, Alaska Native culture has experienced numerous assaults and transformations.¹¹ Russian occupation in the mid-1700s exposed Alaska Natives to diseases that decimated the population and to alcohol, which further disrupted social life. When Alaska was transferred to the United States in 1867, Natives became a major component of the commercial fishing labor force.¹² This helped accelerate cultural change toward a mixed economy of capital and subsistence and was accompanied by an

increasing reliance on Western technology in pursuit of traditional subsistence activities.¹³

American occupation of Alaska brought more disease and alcohol, further decimating the Native population. In 1900, an influenza epidemic known as the Great Death killed more than half of the Eskimo and Athapaskan people exposed to it. Harold Napoleon, an Alaska Native spiritual healer, noted that "this epidemic killed whole families and wiped out whole villages. It gave birth to a generation of orphans—our current grandparents and great-grandparents."¹⁴ In the 1930s, Native children were forced into boarding schools, where they were usually punished for speaking their Native language. The ensuing demise of their language further eroded traditional culture, and the diminished contact with elders reduced opportunities to pass on cultural traditions to new generations.¹⁵

Native culture became more modernized in 1971 when federal legislation allocated 44 million acres of land and \$962 million to Alaska Natives. Natives were organized into a framework of village corporations to manage their resources. Three Native corporations were established in Prince William Sound for the villages of Chenega Bay and Tatitlek (each with a population of less than 100) and the village of Eyak located in Cordova, where nearly 500 Natives reside.

Although much of traditional Native culture has been lost through population loss and modernization, subsistence continues to be an important part of the self-identity of many Alaska Natives.¹⁶ As one Native noted:

When we worry about losing our subsistence way of life, we worry about losing our identity. . . . It's that spirit that makes you who you are, makes you think the way you do and act the way you do and how you perceive the world and relate to the land. Ninety-five percent of our cultural tradition now is subsistence . . . it's what we have left of our tradition.¹⁷

Many Natives living in towns and urban areas continue to participate in subsistence activities, particularly through social networks that share traditional foods and resources. These activities reaffirm their Native identity and maintain part of their cultural heritage.

Although many Alaska Natives live in urban areas, others reside in small towns and isolated villages where they practice a subsistence economy and lifestyle. Like other subsistence cultures, Native village

economies are quite different from industrial economies. Since residents produce and consume their own products, most Native villages have no stores or markets. Resource distribution is based on communal networks of family, extended kinships, friendships, and the village. Subsistence resources are not thought of in terms of dollars, and there are few jobs for pay. Much of the cash that occasionally comes into the community is spent on modernizing subsistence operations (for example, snowmobiles and guns). Instead of the job specialization found in industrial economies, a villager has a broad range of skills and works with a wide variety of natural resources.

Compared to Western capitalist culture, a subsistence culture has more direct and intimate links to the environment. Cultural activities of Alaska Natives are intertwined with seasonal cycles.¹⁸ Chief Walter Meganack explains:

Our lives are rooted in the seasons of God's creation. Since time immemorial, the lives of Native people harmonized with the rhythm and cycles of nature. We are a part of nature. We don't need a calendar or clock to tell us what time it is. The misty green of new buds on the trees tell us, the birds returning from their winter vacation tell us, the daylight tells us. The roots of our lives grow deep into the water and land. That is who we are. The land and the water are our sources of life. The water is sacred.¹⁹

Subsistence harvests also serve as a context for teaching skills and lessons of life, storytelling, and other cultural activities. Eyak Native Patience Faulkner states:

It is during the cycles of subsistence that bonding is strengthened and expanded. The sense of worth is solidified and new skills are learned. It is during these bonding times that our individual value is placed within our community, and we are able to understand what we must do to preserve our lives and to live in harmony.²⁰

Rita Miraglia, a subsistence specialist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, observes:

When someone goes out harvesting, they're not just doing it for themselves; they're doing it for their community. It gives them connection

to the generations before them. It gives them connection to the generations to come. So it's all about community.²¹

Subsistence is the remaining link most Alaska Natives have with their traditional culture. This intimate relation to natural seasonal cycles includes symbolic definitions and expressions of a way of life. As an Eyak Native describes it, "This is a way of life for us, not just subsistence. It's part of us. We are part of the earth. We respect it."²²

Alaska Natives have endured many traumatic encounters with the West and, as a result, their culture continues to change. Throughout these changes and declines in environmental resources, fragments of their traditional culture have survived, particularly subsistence. When the *Exxon Valdez* ran aground, Alaska Natives experienced a serious threat to their subsistence culture.

INITIAL EFFECTS OF THE SPILL: YEAR ONE

Alaska Natives encountered many problems after the spill and during the cleanup. The timing of the spill was particularly disruptive since it occurred as spring was breaking the long, cold grip of winter.

As news and images of the oil spill spread, Natives experienced a mixture of emotions: denial, outrage, sadness, numbness, hurt, confusion, and grief. "First I cried, and then I was mad and then cried. It was just really mixed."²³ "This is hurting more than anything else we ever experienced. It's like losing everything you had."²⁴ "Some people were depressed and suicidal. Even nonfishermen felt somebody had broken in and entered their house. [There was a] terrible feeling of rape, violation."²⁵ "Seeing the dead animals day after day really got to me. I found myself standing in the middle of Main Street crying."²⁶ "Those days were horrible. . . . Dying animals were floating around. Dead animals. . . . It's beyond imagination. Oil everywhere. . . . Dead otters. Dead deer. Dead birds."²⁷ "When you pick up these dead carcasses day after day, you go through a mourning process. It's not only death in your environment, but, in a sense, it's a death of yourself. Because you're part of that environment."²⁸

Residents of Tatitlek experienced fear because the tanker was grounded a few miles from their village and they could smell the fumes from the leaking oil. As Tatitlek Village Council president Gary Komp-

koff recalls, "It's not something that people can easily forget. The smell made some people sick. The herring season was about to open; our first harvest after winter. The government had to shut it down. Shut down our salmon too. We lost it all."²⁹

Chenega Bay villagers endured additional pain because the *Exxon Valdez* grounded 25 years to the day after their village was completely destroyed in the Great Alaskan Earthquake and all the residents were forced to move. The people had managed to maintain their spirit of community and had just recently completed rebuilding and resettling their village. "And then the oil spill hit," explained Gail Ivanoff, a village resident. "It was like . . . that I felt a very deep hurt. That the pain they had suffered in '64. Not even 20 [sic] years later that we would have to endure this kind of devastation again down here."³⁰

Throughout the spill area, village residents experienced trauma as oil washed up on their shores and they witnessed the environmental destruction. Shock overcame many who witnessed the massive death brought about by the spill. Chief Meganack said, "We walked the beaches, but the snails and the barnacles and the chitons are falling off the rocks, dead."³¹

Like emergency response workers at the site of a disastrous crash, Alaska Natives were numbed by the total devastation they witnessed from the oil. An Eyak Native leader noted, "The morning after the spill I got calls from the elderly saying 'I feel like someone has died, like a part inside me is gone.'³²

Alaska Natives had never experienced such environmental destruction and contamination. Contamination intruded into the very fabric of their spiritual beliefs and day-to-day behavior. Many believed the oil spill had damaged their relationship with the environment. Kai Erikson's interviews with Alaska Natives revealed the depth of their feelings³³: "They killed something vital in me when they spilled that oil. You see, there's a rapport, a kind of kinship you sometimes develop with a particular place. It becomes sacred to you. That connection has been severed for me."³⁴ "People around here are closely related to the land and the ocean, so the death of birds and animals and seeing so much oil in the water has a deep impact on their lives. . . . This is their home, and it's been violated."³⁵ "I was born of this land, these waters. . . . I'm as infected as mother nature is, suffocating and gasping for breath. . . . As the environment deteriorates, we too deteriorate."³⁶ "The beach was sick, the water was sick. We couldn't give it medicine to make it

well. . . . It was sick and there was nothing I could do to fix it."³⁷ "It's not only death in your environment, but in a sense it's a death of yourself, because you're a part of that environment."³⁸ "The Sound isn't dead, but it is very, very sick. My heart is sick, too. . . . Along with the countless birds, otters, and other casualties of the spill, a part of me has died."³⁹

Natives were concerned about the environmental damage, the loss of subsistence resources, and the safety of subsistence food. Because the spill occurred at the beginning of the traditional harvest season, subsistence activities were disrupted all year. The decline in subsistence harvests meant that "store" food had to be shipped to many villages.

Oil covered many of the areas traditionally used to harvest subsistence foods. This created concern about the safety of subsistence foods that may have been exposed to the oil. As Chief Meganack observed, "We caught our first fish, the annual first fish, the traditional delight of all; but it got sent to the state to be tested for oil. No first fish this year."⁴⁰ Chenega Bay residents Larry and Gail Evanoff related the following:

We always say "the tide goes out, the table is set." But not anymore. You're going to have to be really picky and choosy when the table is set. What's all this oil going to do to our food; our supermarket out there?⁴¹

Natives experienced a further loss of traditional authority as they had to rely on outside authorities for food safety. Daryl Totmoff explained, "You can't have a scientist in a white coat come up and tell you everything is safe. It's going to take a long time to feel comfortable again. It's going to take a long time even if they give us a clean bill of health. We're still really wary and unsure about a lot of things. The big question mark is still there."⁴²

In addition to the social disruptions caused by the decline in subsistence, the disaster response also took a toll. Exxon's cleanup strategy of hiring an army of workers to treat the shoreline and recover oil had disruptive effects. Native villages were inundated with a seemingly unending influx of people and technology. Chief Meganack explained:

Before we have a chance to hold each other and share our tears, our sorrow and our loss, we suffer yet another devastation. We are invaded by the oil companies offering jobs, high pay, lots of money. We need to clean the oil, get it out of our water, bring death back to life. We

are intoxicated with desperation. We don't have a choice but to take what is offered. So we take the jobs, we take the orders, we take the disruption, we participate in the senseless busywork.⁴³

Native villages experienced a "human spill" as corporate and government officials, cleanup crews, scientists, lawyers, and media personnel traveled through the oiled communities. Village populations also increased as relatives of villagers came to work on cleanup crews. Most outsiders, particularly the media, were ignorant of Alaska Native culture. Eric Morrison, a Tlingit Native who conducted research in the village of Tatitlek, observed, "It did not matter where the news people came from or their particular field of media, they all were insensitive to the community, arrogant, frightening to the children, and abusive to the elders. Reportedly they chased children and elders into homes, attempted to take pictures through residents' windows, and laughed at people who were caught off guard."⁴⁴

The arrival of so many strangers in such a short time caused many Natives to feel threatened and uneasy in their own communities. A Chenega Bay resident said, "It was like living in an apartment and then all of a sudden there are ten people that you don't know who come in and live with you."⁴⁵ The high number of strangers led many villagers to lock their doors, something most had never felt the need to do. The human spill became such a problem that some local leaders issued informal bans on travel into the village. A village official in the Native village of Karluk reported, "Finally, we decided to keep the reporters out. I remember getting on the radio when a plane showed up and telling the pilot that if there were any reporters on the plane don't think about landing. They are not welcome here!"⁴⁶

Along with the "human spill" came a "money spill." Many Natives experienced a sudden and dramatic increase in cash income from working on the cleanup. Instead of providing a boost to the community, the influx of cash was perceived by some as "money pollution." Most villagers were not accustomed to dealing with large amounts of cash, and oftentimes it was poorly managed. Some Natives used money to purchase alcohol and drugs and smuggle them into the village. The income also forced some to confront the Internal Revenue Service for the first time. In subsistence villages, cash can become a disruptive intrusion. As Cordova resident David Grimes explained, "The people of Tatitlek don't really measure their life in dollars. If you screw up the environment,

you've screwed everything up. If you make a cash settlement, you screw them up."⁴⁷

Authorities in charge of the cleanup ignored the Natives' knowledge of the local area. Chief Meganack observed, "Our people know the water and the beaches, but they get told what to do by people who should be asking, not telling."⁴⁸ A Native official of Chugach said, "The people there [in the villages] know the current flows of Prince William Sound. They knew there was no way the oil spill could be contained, we knew it would impact Seldovia, English Bay, Port Graham, and other areas but we were not asked, we were ignored when we went to the meetings to give input."⁴⁹ Officials often overlooked the fact that some Natives were highly educated (for example, some are scientists and attorneys), and in some cases they displayed blatant racism.

Cleanup activities disrupted families, especially those with children. Many children received less care as parents worked on cleanup crews or became involved in other spill-related activities. As one villager described it, the jobs "were not just 8 to 5 jobs. They were like 7 to 12 [at night] and sometimes longer. They worked until midnight unloading boats, got home, slept three hours, and got up and went back to work."⁵⁰

In some families, one or both parents were gone for weeks working on cleanup crews. Declining parental supervision led to increased drinking and drug use among some teenagers.⁵¹ Within a month of the spill, the village of Tatitlek requested \$40,000 from Exxon to provide adequate child care in the village. Exxon did not respond to this request despite the efforts of state officials. A Tatitlek village administrator expressed his frustration: "It was pretty incredible that Exxon would spend eighty thousand dollars to save an otter but they weren't willing to spend any money on the children."⁵²

Social life was also disturbed by the disaster. Research indicated that individuals working on the spill reported significant increases in domestic violence and abuse of alcohol and drugs in their communities and among their families and friends.⁵³ Dr. Bill Richards, the Chief of Behavioral Health for the Alaska Area Native Health Service, observed:

I know of villages that had many alcohol-related problems in the past, but had begun a slow and painful process of recovery, with many villagers sober prior to the spill. After the spill, village leaders began drinking again, and many in the village have now "fallen off the wagon" with

re-emergence of the numerous alcohol-related problems—child-abuse, domestic violence, accidents, etc.—that were there before.⁵⁴

The assault on the environment, disruption of subsistence activities, and strains on family and village life affected the transmission of traditional culture to new generations. As Chief Meganack explained, "Our elders feel helpless. They cannot do all the activities of gathering food and preparing for the winter. And most of all, they cannot teach their young ones the Native way. How will the children learn the values and the ways if the water is dead? If the water is dead, maybe we are dead, our heritage, our tradition, our ways of life and living and relating to nature and each other."⁵⁵

LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THE SPILL: 1990–1996

The effects of the disaster on Alaska Natives and their culture did not end after the first year. Chronic ecological effects emerged as the ecosystem struggled to recover and Natives tried to cope with the consequences. Commercial fishermen, Alaska Natives, and other groups economically or culturally tied to the damaged environment experienced uncertainty, distrust, and cultural disorganization in the aftermath of the disaster. Natives experienced continued disruption in subsistence as well as persistent social strains and chronic psychological stress. They also experienced a "secondary disaster" when they became embroiled in litigation against Exxon.

Alaska Natives in the spill area experienced a sharp decline in subsistence harvests following the disaster.⁵⁶ Subsistence harvests in all communities in the spill area declined in 1989, and many remained below pre-spill levels in 1990. By 1991–1992, however, most had recovered to levels comparable to those observed prior to the spill.

Subsistence recovery was slower in Prince William Sound. Prior to the disaster, Tatitlek and Chenega Bay harvested more than 600 pounds of wild foods for every person in the village. Harvests dropped to 225 pounds in 1989 and 150 pounds in 1990. The harvests for the two villages increased to 345 pounds in 1991, but fell again to only 275 pounds in 1993. Although yields continued to improve gradually, subsistence harvests had not recovered to pre-spill levels by 1996. A U.S. Department of the Interior study reported that "This

decline in subsistence, reliance on store bought groceries, and other economic hardships related to the oil spill increased personal and family friction and stress.⁵⁷

Part of the decline in subsistence harvests can be attributed to safety concerns about subsistence foods. Residents were particularly concerned about mussels, clams, and other shellfish. Fears about the safety of subsistence foods were reinforced when the Prince William Sound herring population crashed in 1993. Villagers observed surface hemorrhages, deformities, and abnormal behaviors among the herring, and laboratory tests concluded that the population had a viral infection. This supported the perceptions of many elders that the harm to the environment was long-term.

Villagers were skeptical when officials announced that the virus posed no human health threats and the herring were safe to eat. Tatitlek village council president Gary Kompkoff summarized the issue:

Prior to the oil spill, our people never had to worry about their resources, for generations we have been able to harvest whatever we wanted without worrying about the safety of consuming anything. The total failures of the herring and salmon seasons this year have made residents of Prince William Sound wonder what the true impact of the oil spill has been on the sound. The herring are an integral part of the food chain, almost all of the subsistence resources we rely on depend largely on herring for their sustenance. When the herring returned to the sound with sores and lesions on them, we became extremely concerned about the safety of harvesting any and contacted the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the Department of Environmental Conservation about their condition; we were told that while both agencies were not sure what was affecting the herring, they were safe for human consumption. This made absolutely no sense at all to us. Suppose there were meats in the American supermarkets that had sores and lesions on them, do you think that either agency would have told the consumers that the meats were safe, even before they had determined what was affecting the meats?⁵⁸

Subsistence harvests also declined because resources were more scarce. Chenega Bay villagers reported fewer birds, fish, marine mammals, and wildlife. "This was the poorest year we ever had for seal. I looked for sea lion, but I didn't get any."⁵⁹ "There are no more octopus along the

beach [on Evans Island] and no gumboots."⁶⁰ "I couldn't find any shrimp in the normal hot spots. I used to be able to get shrimp just a couple hundred yards in front of my cabin. They're not there now."⁶¹ "Seals are scarce. When you go out on a boat, you seldom see seals or sea lions like before. Man, the water is just dead. Along eighteen miles of Knight Island where we used to harvest, I didn't see even one. Now we have to go thirty miles by boat to find seals. We used to get them less than two miles away from the village."⁶² "Most all the animals use the ocean for salt, for kelp, and it's still oiled. [The] land otters and mink are dead. I haven't seen an ermine in four years."⁶³ "We were out for six hours. [We] saw not one [bird] at Cape Elrington. [The] oil spill killed them all. Oil is at Bishop Rock, Sleepy Bay, Pt. Helen, and it comes through here. I have been here [in Prince William Sound] 17 years. Now you can run all day and count all the birds you see on one hand."⁶⁴ "[Marine mammal harvest numbers] are a lot less because they are more scarce. There are not as many around and they're dropping yearly. We think the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill had a lot more to do with it than people believe. The pups sank. We saw it. How can a mother seal identify its pup if it's covered with crude?"⁶⁵

The decline in subsistence resources disrupted culture in a variety of ways. Many people, especially elders, hungered for foods that were no longer available. As an elder from Chenega Bay explained, "I still hunger for clams, shrimp, crab, octopus, gumboots. Nothing in this world will replace them. To be finally living in my ancestors' area and be able to teach my kids, but now it's all gone. We still try, but you can't replace them."⁶⁶ When asked about the importance of subsistence foods to Native identity, a Cordova Native replied, "Without those things, a part of *us* is missing. Because we were raised that way."⁶⁷ When asked what would happen if there were no game, another Cordova Native answered, "A part of our lives would be missing. We'd be craving something we can't get. It would bring a void."⁶⁸

Social disruption continued in the years following the disaster. There were declines in social relations among spouses, children, relatives, friends, neighbors, and co-workers, and more conflicts with outsiders and friends⁶⁹: "The oil spill has drifted people apart. We used to help each other. Before, these people were one big family, but after the oil spill I noticed the village—that it's pulling away again, people started going into their own shell, and just pulling away."⁷⁰ "That's one of the saddest things that came out of this. This was a very tight-knit,

close community, and it's really been fragmented, you know, the trust. People are uncertain."⁷¹ "You can deal with the dead salmon and the dead otters, but you can't deal with the damage done to the social fabric of the community."⁷² Natives exposed to the spill tended to have problems with alcohol, drugs, and fighting and observed these problems in their communities and among their families and friends.⁷³

Problems also persisted among Native children. For example, there were reports of children not liking to be left alone, of children fighting with other children, having trouble getting along with their parents, and suffering declines in academic performance.⁷⁴

This chronic pattern of stress was worsened by limited mental health resources. Native villages in the spill area relied on professionals from larger communities. However, the disaster overburdened mental health services, and in many communities the turnover rate of personnel increased. As Patience Faulkner explained:

The social service people are good at their jobs. [But] these people were damaged by the spill, just like everybody else. They tried to cope, their work load went up, but it was like the hurt helping the hurt. It was very difficult for them. And we would not accept at all a stranger coming in from Fairbanks, or Juneau, or Nome, to be our social worker, and sit there and say, "Yes, I know how you feel." No, you don't know how I feel, because you were not here. You did not go through the scare, the trauma, the fright, the financial disaster. There was nothing a social worker from anywhere else can say to help us. We have got to heal from within.⁷⁵

As a result, most Alaska Natives did not receive adequate assistance to help them cope with the personal, family, and community stress they were experiencing.

Litigation created additional problems. Alaska Natives were among the many groups that filed a class-action lawsuit against Exxon.⁷⁶ Natives claimed the disaster damaged subsistence resources and thereby disrupted their culture. Lawyers argued that the Natives' "subsistence way of life was central to their culture in a way that was fundamentally different from the noncommercial resource uses of other Alaskans."⁷⁷

The Natives' claims of cultural damage were rejected in a 1994 court ruling by Judge H. Russel Holland. Judge Holland ruled that such

claims were not recognized by maritime law. He further stated:

The Alaska Natives' non-economic subsistence claims are not "of a kind different from [those] suffered by other members of the public exercising the right common to the general public that was the subject of interference." Although Alaska Natives may have suffered to a greater degree than members of the general public, "differences in the intensity with which a public harm is felt does not justify a private claim for public nuisance."⁷⁸

The judge acknowledged a universal right to lead a subsistence lifestyle:

All Alaskans, and not just Alaska Natives, have the right to obtain and share wild food, enjoy uncontaminated nature, and cultivate traditional cultural, spiritual, and psychological benefits in pristine natural surroundings. Neither the length of time in which Alaska Natives have practiced a subsistence lifestyle nor the manner in which it is practiced makes the Alaska Native lifestyle unique.⁷⁹

Under the law applied to this case, the subsistence activities of Alaska Natives were indistinguishable from those of non-natives.

Judge Holland did recognize a cultural difference between Alaska Natives and non-native Alaskans, but he declared:

The affront to Native culture occasioned by the escape of crude oil into Prince William Sound is not actionable on an individual basis. . . . The Alaska Natives' claims for non-economic losses is [sic] rejected, and the plaintiffs must find recompense for interference with their culture from the public recoveries that have been demanded of and received from Exxon.⁸⁰

Specifically, Judge Holland reasoned that Exxon's legal settlement with the state of Alaska and the federal government provided compensation for "lifestyle" damage claims. He later noted:

The value Alaska Natives place on their choice to engage in subsistence activities is a non-economic "way-of-life" claim which this court has already rejected. In the case of subsistence harvests, to place a

value on anything other than the lost harvest itself is to place a value on lifestyle. The court recognizes that lifestyle has a value, but the value is non-economic. Quite simply, the choice to "engage in [subsistence] activities" is a lifestyle choice. . . . The lifestyle choice was made before the spill and was not caused by the spill. . . . Lest there be any doubt, the claims of the Native subsistence harvesters are limited to the economic value of the lost subsistence harvest.⁸¹

The result of Judge Holland's rulings was a rejection of cultural damage claims and a narrowing of claims to the economic value of damaged resources.

Class-action litigation caused many Natives to feel further victimized because damages to their culture were disregarded. These feelings intensified when the case went to trial in 1994. The Natives were among several groups seeking compensation for damages caused by the disaster. The jury awarded \$20 million to Native corporations for damage to subsistence resources. Natives were also one of many parties awarded a share of \$5 billion in punitive damages. However, the case was appealed and Exxon has vowed to appeal all the way to the Supreme Court. Twelve years after the spill, the damages remain unpaid.

CULTURAL REVITALIZATION: 1996–2001

Alaska Natives in Prince William Sound experienced a turning point in 1996 that led to a revival of their culture. Subsistence was slowly improving, but people were still concerned about recovery of the ecosystem. Social disruption continued, but it resembled stressful patterns that existed prior to the spill. Communities continued to experience mental health problems, and attempts were made to remedy these through innovative programs. Natives also began to experience the effects of a 1991 legal settlement between Exxon and the Alaskan and federal governments.

Twelve years after the spill, subsistence harvests have returned to pre-spill levels, even in the heavily oiled areas of Prince William Sound. Certain resources are still scarce or unsafe to use, so Natives have increased their harvests of other resources. They also report spending more effort and money and traveling further to harvest subsistence

foods. However, there is still concern about the recovery of the environment. Valdez charter boat operator Stan Stephens observed:

It'll probably take another 20 years for the Sound to be back as it was. When you go out, you can tell there's not the bird life there was. There are problems with the whales. We lost almost all our herring, and everything that feeds off herring had to find another food source. Some of the marine life had to go someplace else, but it's slowly coming back.⁸²

Social disruption continues, particularly in Native villages where high rates of suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse exist.⁸³ Because many of these patterns existed prior to the spill, it is difficult to determine the role the disaster had in intensifying them. Traditional community mental health services have been ineffective in responding to the unique problems posed by the oil spill disaster. A research project to develop, implement, and evaluate an alternative community mental health program was initiated in 1995 under the direction of Dr. J. Steven Picou.⁸⁴ The program has been effective in informing the public and reducing some of the mental and social stress. However, mental health problems remain as the environment and economy struggle to recover and the litigation languishes in the courts.

Litigation between Exxon and the Alaskan and federal governments has brought significant changes to Natives' lives and communities. In 1991, Exxon agreed to pay \$900 million over a ten-year period. The settlement created the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council, made up of representatives from six state and federal agencies, to manage the settlement fund. The fund was targeted for recovery and restoration of damaged resources. The budget included about \$180 million for scientific research on injured species and construction of a state-of-the-art aquarium and research laboratory. The bulk of the funds, however, went into restoration efforts to buy, preserve, and protect lands adjacent to heavily oiled areas. More than 650,000 acres, including 1,400 miles of shoreline, were purchased to provide damaged species with a habitat untouched by logging and other development activities. As the executive director of the Trustee Council, Molly McCammon, explained, "We've gotten incredible resources into the public domain. We wanted to insure there'd be no further harm to wildlife resources and provide a safety net by providing a long-term recovery area."⁸⁵

The Trustee Council land purchase posed another dilemma for Alaska Natives because much of the land needed for restoration was owned by Native corporations. The financially strapped corporations were caught between a need for money and a need to maintain their cultural heritage. With many Natives living in poverty amid continuing uncertainty about subsistence, most corporations decided to sell large tracts of land. The Eyak Native Corporation in Cordova earned \$45 million, Tatitlek \$34.5 million, and Chenega Bay \$34 million from land sales to the Trustee Council.⁸⁶

Decisions to sell land were reached differently among the six corporations involved. Although one corporation, Port Graham, decided not to sell, three, including Tatitlek, were mostly in favor. The Chenega Bay and Eyak corporations experienced more debate and contention.⁸⁷ Eyak village council vice president Glenn Ujoka stated, "We lose our identity when we lose our land."⁸⁸ Likewise, Mark Hoover, an Eyak council member, explained, "Most of the Native corporations are in dire financial need—this one's always in trouble. This was our land, our way of life. They only came to the Natives so they could get the land back. The money's only going to mean \$70,000, \$80,000 over five years and you can't live on that. Maybe if we'd had part of that \$5 billion, we wouldn't have had to sell."⁸⁹ Eyak member Sylvia Lange lamented, "But it's so pathetic. We have sold our children's birthright. It has made the land into something it never should have been. This has pulled the rug out from under any kind of tribal feeling among us. Now, it's all about individual gain. I didn't think I was in it for me—I thought we were in it for us. They dangled \$45 million in front of people who desperately needed it, and we sold our heritage. It's human nature. It's not fair to hold Natives to a higher standard than anyone else. Most of them understand it's more money than they've ever seen in their lives."⁹⁰ Luke Borer, a former Eyak corporation official, summarized the situation when he said, "I'm sure everybody will look back at this and regret it. Remember, the Indians on Manhattan thought those beads were a good deal, too."⁹¹

Despite these continuing problems, Native culture has experienced a sense of revitalization in recent years. The decline of subsistence and uncertainty regarding its recovery increased awareness of the importance of traditional culture. Many Natives felt the need to re-energize their local communities by holding more community events and teaching traditional arts and crafts. Money from land sales has assisted in this

effort, but a more significant event occurred in 1996 when a "Talking Circle" ceremony was held by the Native Village of Eyak and residents from Tatitlek and Chenega Bay were invited to participate.

A Talking Circle is a ceremony where individuals share experiences, feelings, and thoughts with others. It is open to all village members, and all who attend are "welcomed and openly received by the circle."⁹² Talking Circles are flexible enough to accommodate various groups and situations. Participants "can come together to share themselves," and "truth can be spoken about all things communal, familial, and personal."⁹³

The 1996 Talking Circle was organized by the Native Village of Eyak as part of a community mental health research program sponsored by the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council.⁹⁴ The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill was the focus of the Talking Circle, and the objective was to assist in healing spill-related cultural and personal problems. The two-day event received assistance from Native spiritualists from Alaska, an American Indian outreach specialist, and the Northern Light Drummers, a Native group who performed traditional music.⁹⁵ More than eighty-five people participated in the ceremony, including local Natives and their non-native spouses and friends. Natives from Tatitlek and Chenega Bay also attended, including some Elders from both villages who brought special significance to the ceremony. Dr. Picou was one of several non-Natives who participated by talking about research findings on the disaster's damage. His observations of the ceremony provided a firsthand account of this unique event.⁹⁶

The opening ceremony focused on healing relationships between the people and their environment. An apology was formally offered to the sea otters through a ritual conducted on the shores of Orca Inlet in southeastern Prince William Sound.

A variety of topics emerged from the Talking Circle. Picou identifies five themes: ecological damage, Exxon, traditional culture, the group, and the self.⁹⁷ Many participants expressed sorrow for the injuries suffered by various species in the ecosystem and apologized for the hurt caused by human beings. In addressing Exxon, participants talked about Exxon's failure to live up to promises and the corporation's disregard of Native subsistence culture as part of its legal defense. Native cultural tradition was reasserted through expressions of a "cultural spirit" of harmony with nature, the need to return to more traditional ways, and the therapeutic performances of

the Northern Lights Drummers. Participants addressed group conflicts, and many talked about the positive healing they were experiencing from the ceremony. During the ceremony, some individuals made public commitments to change their lives.

The Talking Circle has had a revitalizing effect on traditional culture. In Cordova, the Native Village of Eyak has become more active in organizing cultural events and teaching traditional arts and crafts. Villages are using money from land sales to send the youth to "Spirit Camps" where traditional culture is passed on to the next generation.⁹⁸ One Talking Circle participant summarized the event: "The Talking Circle was important because it gave everyone a sense of knowing that we all shared a common hurt. It also gave direction to all Native people who were there. The way for us should be the Native way. We now realize that it is important for us and our children to embrace our elders and our heritage."⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill cannot be described simply as a supertanker impaled on a reef, spewing millions of gallons of oil into a pristine natural environment. Oil not only discharged into the environment, it coursed throughout the subsistence culture of Alaska Natives. The disaster directly challenged a culture with traditional subsistence bonds to the environment, producing emotional responses and long-term psychological distress within Native communities. These effects have continued and are among "the most lingering and measurable of the spill."¹⁰⁰

Since contact with Western civilization, Alaska Native culture has been repeatedly assaulted. In response to these challenges, Alaska Natives have been able to retain and transmit to their children a core element of their identity—subsistence. The ability to endure the "Great Death," attempts at cultural genocide, loss of resources, and the delayed trauma of these events is a testament to a commitment to survive the *Exxon Valdez* disaster as a living culture. More than a decade ago, the late Chief Walter Meganack described this resolve:

A wise man once said, "where there is life, there is hope." And that is true. But what we see now is death, death not of each other, but of a

source of life, the water. We will need much help, much listening in order to live through the long barren season of dead water, a longer winter than ever before. I am an elder. I am chief. I will not lose hope. I will help my people. We have never lived through this kind of death, but we have lived through lots of other kinds of death. We will learn from the past, we will learn from each other, and we will live. The water is dead, but we are alive, and where there is life there is hope.¹⁰¹

NOTES

This essay was originally published in J. Steven Picou, Duane A. Gill, and Maurie J. Cohen, eds., *The Exxon Valdez Disaster: Readings on a Modern Social Problem* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1997). Used with permission.

Research for this essay was supported in part by the Mississippi State University Social Science Research Center, Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station (Project No. MIS-605080), and the College of Arts and Sciences, University of South Alabama. Additional support was provided by grants from the National Science Foundation, Polar Social Science Division (DPP 9101093), the Earthwatch Center for Field Research, and the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council. The authors are solely responsible for the contents of this essay.

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