

the effect on People

The Exxon Valdez oil spill had tremendous negative impacts, both culturally and economically, on the people who live in the spill area. The lives of the people who live, work, and recreate in the areas affected by the spill were completely disrupted. Commercial fishing families did not fish and their vessels sat dormant. Those people who traditionally subsisted on the fish, shellfish, wildlife, and plants of the region no longer trusted what they were eating and instead turned to high-priced groceries. Recreational use was mostly shut down and the world-wide image of Prince William Sound as a pristine ecosystem was tarnished with oil.

Twenty years later, the spill and the effects of the lingering Exxon Valdez oil in the ecosystem, continue to affect the social fabric of native villages and communities throughout the affected area.

Commercial Fishing



Commercial fishing was injured as a result of the spill's impacts to commercial fish species and through subsequent emergency fishery closures. Fisheries for salmon, herring, crab, shrimp, rockfish and sablefish were closed in 1989 throughout Prince William Sound, Cook Inlet, the outer Kenai coast, Kodiak and the Alaska Peninsula due to oiling. Shrimp and salmon fisheries remained closed in parts of Prince William Sound through 1990. The most important species that is still experiencing significant problems is Pacific herring. Herring were commercially fished for food, bait, sac-roe, and spawn on kelp.

Private Plaintiffs' Civil Suit

Private plaintiffs filed a civil suit against Exxon. The case moved through the courts for 14 years. After repeated appeals by Exxon in June 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on the case, cutting the punitive damages from the initial award of \$5 billion to \$507.5 million. Distributions to the over 32,000 claimants are now being made.



Recreation and Tourism

Recreation and tourism dramatically declined in 1989 in Prince William Sound, Cook Inlet and the Kenai Peninsula. Injuries to natural resources led resource managers to limit access to hunting and fishing areas, and recreational users, such as kayakers, were prevented from enjoying those beaches that harbored visible oil.

Recreation was also affected by changes in human use in response to the spill. Areas that were unopened became more heavily used as activity was displaced from the oiled areas. Even though visitation has increased since the spill, lingering oil remains on beaches and in some localized areas this remains a concern for recreational users.

Subsistence

Fifteen predominantly Alaskan Native communities in the spill area rely heavily on harvests of subsistence resources, such as fish, shellfish, seals, deer, and waterfowl. The spill severely disrupted subsistence activities for the people of these villages. The oil spill cleanup affected the harvests by reducing the availability of fish and wildlife, created concern about the possible health effects of eating oiled fish and wildlife, and disrupted the traditional lifestyle. Fears about food safety have diminished over time, but remain a concern for some.



Passive Use

In evaluating spill damage, the largest damage in monetary terms came not from the direct use of injured resources by individuals, such as sport or commercial fishing, but rather from the loss felt by people who have not visited the spill area but wish to visit some day; those who have no plans to use the area but want their children to have the opportunity; and those who simply value the fact that unspoiled wilderness exists. The key to the recovery of this "passive use" is providing the public with current information on the status of injured resources and the progress made towards their recovery.