

Dark Past

Early Friday morning—March 24, 1989—The *Exxon Valdez* ran aground and spewed 11 million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound.

Images of the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill are burned into the minds of those who remember: oil-blackened seabirds and marine mammals struggling to survive—pristine shorelines awash with oil—all worsened when the weather turned, overwhelming the efforts to contain the oil. Thirty years later, toxic oil still lingers in marshes and under stone-cobbled beaches.

DAMAGES

Short-Term Effects

Oil gushed from the ripped tanker hull, polluting 1,300 miles of coastline. Spreading nearly 500 miles from the accident site at Bligh Reef, the oil threatened seabirds and marine mammals, wilderness and tidal area resources and the services that depend upon them such as fishing and subsistence. At the time, the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill was the worst human-caused environmental disaster in U.S. history.

Long-Term Effects

During the cleanup process, workers sprayed beaches with high-pressure hot water. This dispersed the surface oil, inadvertently causing damage to fragile tidal ecosystems. Many hoped residual oil would lose toxicity from weathering and bacterial degradation. However, waves couldn't reach sub-surface oil in sequestered coves, and icy waters inhibited the bacterial breakdown that would occur in warmer climes. Although toxic oil lingers beneath the surface, it is currently inaccessible to wildlife, and damage has subsided over time. Risk analysis concludes that removal attempts would re-expose the environment to toxins and that it is best to let nature take its course—even if it takes decades.

Ongoing Support

In October 1991, a legal settlement was reached among the State of Alaska, the United States government, and the Exxon Corporation. Exxon paid fines and damages, including a civil settlement of \$900 million. While money cannot reverse the damage, these reparation funds support long-term restoration and research efforts in these fragile and valuable spill-impacted habitats. This allows resource management agencies to continue stewardship of this important and unique environment into the future.



For more information about EVOSTC: <http://www.evostc.state.ak.us/>
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