

*Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill  
Habitat Protection Project Final Report

FY22 Great Land Trust/USFWS Habitat Protection Proposal

*Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council Project [24220100]  
Final Report

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December 2024

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**Abstract:** As directed in the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Settlement Agreement and in accordance with the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council (EVOSTC) Restoration Plan, Great Land Trust (GLT) facilitated the conservation of Alaska property containing habitat important to the restoration and protection of marine and coastal resources, ecosystems, and habitats in order to aid in the overall recovery of, and to enhance the long-term health and viability of, those resources injured by the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill and spill-area ecosystems. To meet the objectives of this grant, GLT completed two projects: the Bookey Project, which conserved a 34.76-acre property on the Kenai River, and the Meals Hill Enhancement Project, which was facilitated by GLT including project management of the planning and implementation of site improvements for a property previously acquired for habitat conservation using *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Habitat Program funding. This grant funded staff time and travel for the Meals Hill Enhancement Project that was funded by *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council Project PWS 4009 Port Valdez – Meals Hill and is detailed in the report for that grant.

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## Grant Purpose and Objective

For the EVOSTC Fiscal Years (EFY) 2022 and 2023, GLT worked to complete existing, established, and/or priority habitat conservation projects throughout the spill area, including a high-priority Alaska State Parks parcel acquisition on the Kenai River adjacent to the Eagle Rock Boat Launch (owned by Phillis Bookey) and a significant enhancement project with the City of Valdez involving Meals Hill, a 184-acre parcel acquired using EVOSTC funds that was targeted for conservation for the parcel's habitat and public recreation values. These projects were determined to aid in the recovery and enhancement of the long-term health and viability of resources, services, and species injured by the oil spill and benefit spill area ecosystems and communities, meeting the priorities and goals set forth under the EVOS Settlement Agreement and Restoration Plan. GLT also assisted EVOSTC with meetings and communications with private landowners interested in habitat protection projects and with field work and research required to evaluate the potential benefits to injured species and prioritization, as called for by the Restoration Plan and EVOSTC policies.

### Objective:

- The permanent protection of habitat important to the restoration and protection of marine and coastal resources, ecosystems, and other habitat that aid in the overall recovery of, and to enhance the long-term health and viability of, those resources injured by the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill and spill-area ecosystems.

## Discussion

The following describes the process and tasks required to meet the grant objectives, along with a more in-depth description of the specific tasks completed for the Bookey and Meals Hill Enhancement projects completed under this grant.

### Process:

- Identify projects that are important to the restoration and protection and/or recovery of resources and services injured by the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill and spill-area ecosystems.
- Conduct landowner outreach of high-ranking properties, gauge landowner interest in voluntary conservation and conduct negotiations with interested landowners.
- Conduct due diligence activities, such as title review; contracting for appraisals, environment assessments, and surveys; drafting deeds or conservation easements; and other activities necessary for the completion of projects.
- Secure additional funds as necessary for the completion of projects.
- Collaborate with partners to facilitate or execute habitat protection transactions and to facilitate enhancements on previously conserved properties for appropriate public recreational use.

### Tasks

Tasks for the two primary projects targeted for this grant funding included: field habitat assessment and measurements; GIS desktop analysis to identify attributes and map habitat for potential conservation; preliminary valuation of priority habitat; landowner contacts and outreach to gauge landowner interest in voluntary habitat conservation and stewardship; preparation of habitat benefit reports to aid the Council in determining Council interest in taking separate actions with willing landowners to acquire a state and federal interest in the habitat; working with stakeholders on enhancements of previously conserved projects to facilitate appropriate recreational access and use; and working to raise and leverage additional funds to meet the directives and goals of the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Settlement Agreement and Restoration Plan.

### The Bookey Project

The Bookey property (Property) is located immediately adjacent to the Eagle Rock Boat Launch on the Kenai River. Eagle Rock Boat Launch is one of the few safe and accessible access points to the Kenai River in that area and is owned and operated by the Alaska State Department of Natural Resources (DNR). DNR was interested in acquiring the Property to expand the boat launch and improve recreational access to the Kenai River.

The Property was, at the time, held in private ownership by Phillys Bookey in trust with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). GLT, in coordination with EVOSTC, had identified the Property as containing conservation and recreation values in line with priorities and goals set forth under

the EVOS Settlement Agreement and Restoration Plan. The Property included 34.76 acres of largely undeveloped land, including forested uplands and 5.26 acres of wetlands along the Property's .18 miles of Kenai River frontage, wetland habitat that is essential to the health of salmon and other species native to the Kenai River and the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill area.

The goal of the Bookey Project was to conserve the property by transferring the fee to DNR while placing a conservation easement on the property to be held by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). GLT completed this project in collaboration with EVOSTC staff, Phillys Bookey, BIA, BLM, and DNR.

Upon identifying the Property and completing a Purchase and Sale Agreement with all parties involved, GLT worked with Mrs. Bookey to identify her requirements related to the sale of the property and the conservation easement, and with BIA to determine the process required to remove the Property from trust and transfer the title to DNR. Mrs. Bookey was amenable to the sale of the property contingent on its continued use for public recreation access and upon the creation of a conservation easement to protect the wetlands and the forested uplands against development. Based on the stated goals of the project and the desire of Mrs. Bookey to sell the property under the condition that it be placed under the protection of a conservation easement, BIA agreed to remove the Property from trust and approve the Warranty Deed for sale to DNR.

In coordination with Mrs. Bookey and DNR, GLT identified the location of a limited development area on the Property where DNR was limited by the conservation easement to the development of facilities to support public access to recreation, such as a visitor center, a stairway, a boardwalk, a road, and a parking lot. GLT contracted with a surveyor to produce a map of the limited development area for the conservation easement. The remainder of the property, outside of the limited development area was restricted for all development and the Property was conserved in perpetuity by the conservation easement.

In addition to the negotiation of the limited development area and conservation easement with Mrs. Bookey, GLT completed due diligence activities, including:

- Contracting and oversight of the Environmental Phase I Report
- Coordinating with the title company to resolve title concerns identified by BLM or DNR
- Contributing to the drafting of the conservation easement by EVOSTC staff.
- Contracting and oversight of the legal review of the conservation easement
- Facilitating conservation easement review by BLM, DNR, and Mrs. Bookey,
- Coordinating with BLM on the required NEPA review of the project

The Bookey Project closed on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023.



## The Meals Hill Enhancement Project

This grant was used in coordination with funding for the design and procurement of initial enhancements at Meals Hill to cover the cost of GLT project management and site visits.

Great Land Trust (GLT) requested funding for the planning, design, engineering, restoration, construction, and completion of initial enhancements on a property previously acquired for habitat conservation using *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Habitat Program funding. The objective of the project was to enhance public use of the property for passive recreational activities, such as wildlife viewing, nature walks, education, interpretation, and other similar uses that do not change the natural character of the property.

The *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council (EVOSTC) approved project funding for initial enhancements for public use of the property under Resolution 17-03 of the EVOSTC, Section II: Habitat Parcel. The final project included completion of the Meals Hill Master Plan, adopted by the Valdez City Council on June 15th, 2021, completion of 95+% (shovel ready) design documents for the implementation of the first phase of the Master Plan, and the purchase of site enhancement amenities for priority elements of the Meals Hill Master Plan, including the entry plaza and the overlook loop trail.

Upon award of the grant, GLT drafted a Memorandum of Agreement between GLT and the City of Valdez (CoV) outlining the project objectives and restricting the use of the funding to supporting the Meals Hill initial property enhancements construction, which included facilitating the development and completion of a site plan, and coordinating the design, engineering, restoration, and construction of initial property enhancements.

In coordination with GLT, CoV published a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for Meals Hill Master Plan planning services, with the goal of awarding a contract in spring/early summer 2020. After a review of responses to the RFQ, Huddle AK LLC (Huddle) was awarded the contract for the Meals Hill Master Plan process in June 2020 with a Master Plan completion deadline set for summer 2021. The Meals Hill Master Plan planning process began in fall of 2020.

GLT worked in close coordination with CoV and Huddle throughout every stage of the Master Plan process, receiving regular updates on project status, reviewing project materials, such as community participation surveys and project presentations, prior to the public release of those materials, and attending quarterly or monthly project team meetings, remotely, in Valdez, or on the Meals Hill site depending on the stage of the project.

The Final Draft of the Meals Hill Master Plan was presented to the CoV Parks Commission on June 8<sup>th</sup> and the City Council on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The City Council unanimously passed the adoption of the Plan, successfully wrapping up the extensive public planning process.

Upon final approval of the Master Plan, the project moved into the implementation phase and GLT continued to coordinate with EVOSTC, BLM, and FWS and work with the CoV to manage design and construction.

The initial RFP for design services awarded to Huddle included production of the 35% Design and Preliminary Engineering Report and Cost Estimates for the property enhancements identified in the Meals Hill Master Plan. Throughout the late fall of 2021, GLT worked in coordination with CoV and Huddle to ensure the plans aligned with the Master Plan site concept. The 35% Design and Preliminary Engineering Report and Cost Estimates were completed in January of 2022, ending Huddle's participation in the project at that point.

In coordination with the CoV, GLT identified three priority elements (initial site enhancements) of the Meals Hill Master Plan (entrance plaza & main trailhead with interpretive signage, a multi-use trail & a vault toilet) for allocation of the USFWS funding for the 95+% (shovel ready) design engineering plans and construction.

The City of Valdez put out an RFP for design services for the production of the 95+% (shovel ready) design engineering plans and construction administration and awarded the contract for A&E services for the 95+% (shovel ready) design documents to Huddle based on a selection and review process overseen by GLT.

In 2023, CoV leveraged the remaining EVOS funding to apply for the American Rescue Plan Act Economic Development Administration (ARPA EDA) Tourism Grant, for the completion of the construction of the three priority elements plus other park amenities identified by the Master Plan.

Because CoV received ARPA EDA grant for the construction of additional Meals Hill trails and facilities included in the Meals Hill Master Plan, the construction timeline for this project was extended, initially until fall of 2023, but then into 2024, due to COVID and labor-related issues.

In coordination with CoV and GLT, Huddle completed the 65% Plans, Specifications, and Estimate Construction Documents set (PS&E) for the initial site enhancements in June of 2023. GLT reviewed and provided feedback on the 65% PS&E.

Throughout the remainder of 2023 and 2024, GLT continued to work closely with CoV and Huddle to ensure that the EVOSTC grant funding was considered separately from the ARPA EDA funding and was concentrated on the design and procurement of the site enhancement amenities agreed to originally. Those items include the 95+% (shovel ready) design engineering plans, and procurement of site amenities for the entrance plaza and overlook loop, interpretive and wayfinding signage, a rain shelter, and an ADA accessible vault toilet. GLT staff also worked with Huddle to ensure the site's interpretive materials and wayfinding signs included content appropriate to the goals of the EVOSTC.

Because some construction activities had been delayed past the EVOSTC grant closing date, GLT provided CoV with guidelines on how to document the procurement and storage of materials so that GLT could be assured the purchases met GLT policies and that the amenities would be installed on Meals Hill. GLT participated in site amenity product selection and reviewed all purchase orders and invoices prior to payment. All site amenities procured by CoV and funded

by EVOSTC were stored securely in CoV warehouse facilities while awaiting installation during the 2024/25 construction season.

GLT met with CoV and Huddle monthly, at a minimum, as the project reached completion and GLT was in regular contact with CoV and Huddle between meetings via phone and email. The 95+% (shovel ready) design documents and the procurement of all site enhancement amenities were completed by December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024. GLT staff visited Meals Hill on October 2, 2024, where they met with CoV and Huddle to tour the property and see the improvements that had been made during the 2024 construction season, as well as confirm the arrival and storage of all enhancements that were purchased with EVOS funding but had not yet been installed.

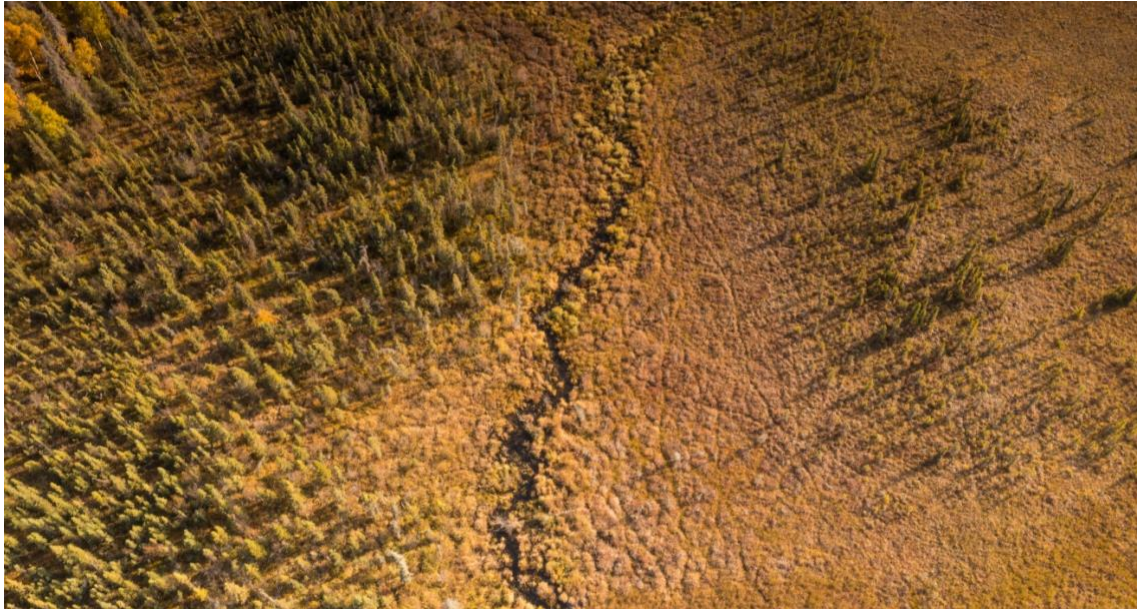
In the fall of 2024, the City of Valdez City Council voted to rename the property “Nayurluku Park at Meals Hill.” Nayurluku is a Sugpiaq word that means “to take care of” or “guard” (Phonetic Spelling: neigh og lou goo).

GLT closed out this grant December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

## Appendix A: Photos

The following are a sampling of photos taken of the Bookey and Meals Hill properties during the grant award period.

### Bookey



*Photo 1: A drone shot of the Bookey property in the fall.*



*Photo 2: The Bookey property with the Kenai River and Denali in the background.*



## Meals Hill



*Photo 3: Meals Hill with the City of Valdez in the background.*



*Photo 4: Meals Hill with the Valdez Ferry Terminal and dock in the foreground and West Peak in the background.*



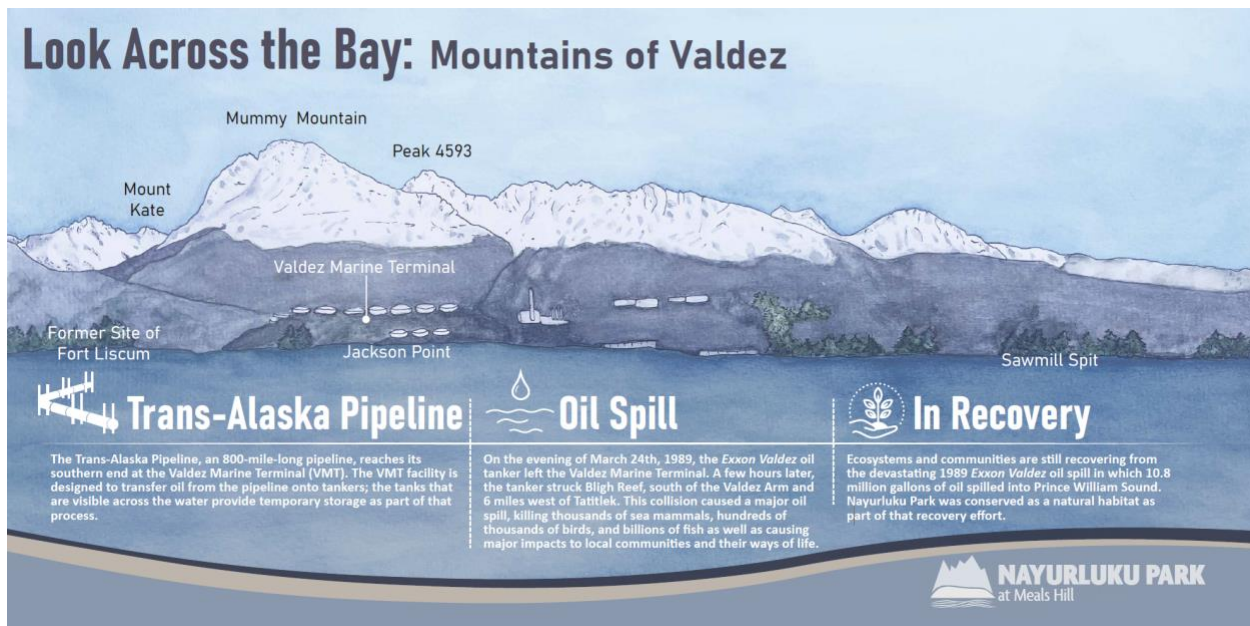


Photo 5: An example of one of the interpretive panels installed as part of this project.

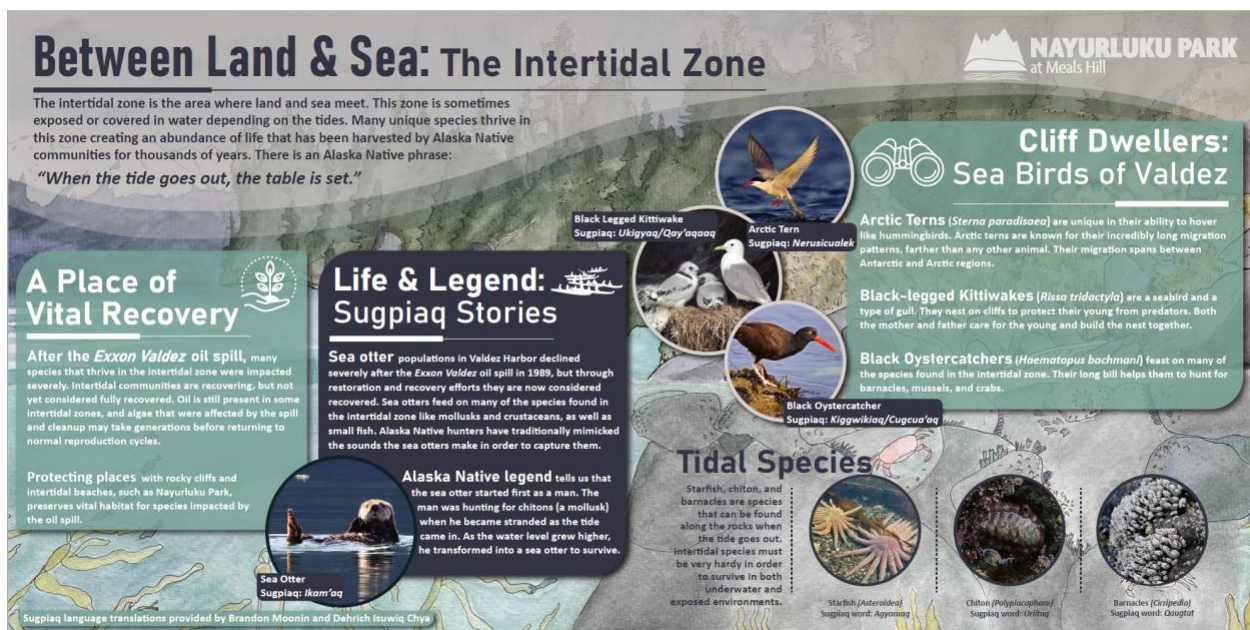


Photo 6: An example of one of the interpretive panels installed as part of this project.





Photo 7: The map and interpretive panels on the trailhead kiosk that was installed as part of this project.



Photo 8: GLT staff traveled to Valdez to inventory and photograph the prefabricated site amenities held in storage in Valdez while awaiting installation during the 2024/25 construction seasons.





*Photo 9: A view of Valdez from one of the new trails on the property.*



*Photo 10: An example of some of the trail work completed as part of this project.*





*Photo 11: The master plan identified locations for several new trails on the property that were constructed in 2024.*



*Photo 12: A view of Mount Francis and Sugarloaf Mountain from Meals Hill.*





*Photo 13: Winter cyclists on Meals Hill.*



*Photo 14: Meals Hill was historically referred to as Blueberry Hill.*