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AFTER THE SPILL

Ten years later, Alaska's wilderness still struggles to heal

At four minutes past midnight on March 24, 1989, the Exxon Valdez struck a reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound, setting off one of the ugliest environmental catastrophes in history. A soupy mousse of 11 million gallons of oil coated 1,500 miles of wilderness. Casualties were enormous. Oil killed 250,000 waterfowl and choked countless marine mammals and fish. "It was a scene out of Dante," says one eyewitness. Among seabirds, the common murre population was reduced by 40 percent; 2,800 sea otters perished; more than a dozen killer whales from a resident pod disappeared. There was a human toll as well. Fisheries went belly-up; locals say divorce rates and the incidence of domestic violence in depressed native villages soared.

It seems unlikely that anything positive could emerge from such a horror, yet a decade later there are signs of healing in the Sound. "If you leave nature alone, it'll right itself over time," says Dave Cline, chairman of the Kodiak Brown Bear Trust, an Anchorage wildlife preservation group. "The spill was a disaster that's become a conservation success story."

A qualified one. With part of the \$1.15 billion that Exxon paid in restitution to the state and federal governments, some 650,000 acres--much of it polluted by the spill--is being converted to nature preserves. The \$5 billion Exxon owes in punitive damages to the local citizenry, currently under appeal, may someday represent a similar windfall. But there's not-so-good news, too. Despite heroic efforts, most injured species have not recovered. Murres are returning, and pink salmon have rebounded after years of high egg mortality, but other creatures--harlequin ducks, harbor seals, cormorants, loons--still show signs of harm. Only bald eagles and river otters have been removed from the government's list of injured animals--two of 28 species. "The Sound is no comparison to what it was," says fisherman Michelle O'Leary. "You'll see a pod of sea lions, one school of herring. Before, we'd see hundreds of sea lions, thousands of birds, 40 types of whales. Herring were boiling in the bays--it was a raucous noise."

"On the surface the Sound looks swell," says Kelley Weaverling, former mayor of the fishing village of Cordova. "It looks fine from a cruise ship. If you'd never seen it before, it looks terrific. But we'd be full of hubris to think we could restore it to what it was." Something else that hasn't recovered in the Sound is trust in the oil industry. Weaverling adds, "We're better prepared for another spill. No one questions if it will happen again. It's a matter of when."

PHOTO (COLOR): A LAND OF EAGLES From a distance, the Sound seems untouched.

PHOTOS (COLOR): MAN AND NATURE The Alyeska oil operations include the Alaska pipeline as well as oil preparation facilities

PHOTO (COLOR): at Valdez, a harbor town of 4,200

PHOTO (COLOR): Alyeska oil fouled beaches along the hundred-mile-wide Sound. Kelley Weaverling claims that oil from the '89 spill has seeped beneath the surface. "Take a walk on the beach, and you'll find it," he says. A government scientist who has studied the area confirms: "Kick up cobble on the shoreline there, and you'll strike oil."

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By Daren Fonda

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