

May 5, 2010

Recovery Still Incomplete After Valdez Spill

By WILLIAM YARDLEY

CORDOVA, Alaska — As the [oil spill](#) spreads ominously in the Gulf of Mexico, its impact uncertain, communities here beside Prince William Sound are still confronting the consequences of March 24, 1989, the day of the [wreck of the Exxon Valdez](#).

The tanker Valdez spilled 11 million gallons of crude [oil](#), staining 1,500 miles of coastline, killing hundreds of thousands of seabirds, otters, seals and whales, and devastating local communities. The spill stopped after just a few days. Recovery may not have an end date.

Fishing here is far from what it was. Suicides and bankruptcies and bitterness surged. Many people left even as a few became “spillionaires,” getting paid to clean up.

A new industry took hold: environmental groups, scientific organizations, experts in the psychological trauma of oil spills. A network of fishermen is now trained and paid by the oil industry to respond if another disaster strikes.

Lawyers, fishermen and environmentalists in the gulf are now calling, looking for guidance in areas like how to harness political anger over the spill and the most effective ecological triage. National news crews are chartering planes to nearby islands to see how oil still coats rocks just below the surface all these years later.

Fishermen recount once again their complicated journeys from the spill to the payments they received just last year from a [punitive damages judgment](#) of about \$500 million against Exxon in 1994.

People here say they want to move on.

“You’ve got one jaded group of people in this town,” Sylvia Lange, who worked her first fishing boat at 14 and now runs a hotel overlooking the water. “First it was the 10th anniversary, then the 20th and now this.”

Cordova is a reluctant touchstone, still trying to figure out how to respond to the event that defines it for much of the outside world. This year, officials hope to break ground on an ambitious new museum that will replace the frayed scrapbooks of news clippings that now rest on a table near dugout canoes and tools used for gold mining in a room connected to the local library.

“We don’t even have an exhibit about the spill, and yet it’s the most-asked question we get,” said Cathy Sherman, who runs the current museum and library. “Nobody even wanted to be reminded of it here.”

Ms. Sherman said the new museum, which has secured about \$18 million in financing from the state and other sources, will tell the story of the spill through objects, including a piece of the Valdez hull. But it will also try to show “what we learned,” she added.

The lessons continue, even after books and dissertations have been written, documentaries made, songs composed and case studies completed. The mountain views are still stunning but the herring fishery is gone, the king and Dungeness crabs, too. Prawns are coming back, but just barely. The loss of the herring industry over the years since the spill has cost the region about \$400 million, said R. J. Kopchak of the [Prince William Sound Science Center](#), although some blame cyclical patterns or other factors for the change, not the spill.

Much of a generation chose paths other than fishing, though some younger people have decided to take their chances.

Makena O'Toole, 24, said his earliest memory from childhood was of the paralyzing moment his father, a fisherman, heard that the Valdez tanker had crashed into Bligh Reef. Now, even with the famed Copper River sockeye that spawn here, Mr. O'Toole said, “This is still not a place to be a fisherman.”

Mr. O'Toole said he plans to move south in September, to fish out of Sitka, where he said the fishery was more abundant “because there wasn't an oil spill there.”

In December, Exxon sent the last of a nearly \$500,000 payment to John Platt, but Mr. Platt said he never saw it. Straight to the state and the bank it went, to clear the liens on his boats and his fishing permits, to dig out of the debt he accumulated, some through his own admitted missteps, in the two decades since the wreck of the Valdez.

The payments were initially supposed to be much higher, before Exxon successfully fought, all the way to the [Supreme Court](#), to have them reduced.

“The money was supposed to bring closure,” Mr. Platt said. “Deep down inside I was really banking on it, but it didn't happen.”

Most people received far less money than Mr. Platt and other fishermen who were able to document strong catches in the years before the spill. Others opted out of the sprawling class-action suit.

Ms. Lange said her family dropped out of the suit and moved to western Alaska to work in the fishing industry there for several years after the spill.

“We made the conscious decision that we were no longer going to be victims,” she said. “I could see my whole life going into the spill.”

Empathy is high here for those closest to the spill in the gulf. Perhaps economic disaster still can be averted, some say. Maybe the fact that the Gulf Coast is so much more accessible than Prince William Sound will help. Maybe its economies will prove diverse enough to handle whatever hit comes. Maybe the warmer water will help disperse the oil. Maybe the fact that, unlike here, the oil spilling in the gulf is being emulsified somewhat as it rises from 5,000 feet below.

But most people here said they thought that at least some communities in the gulf would begin a painful journey with no clear conclusion.

Two years ago, Mike Webber, a fisherman here who also does native carvings, unveiled a “shame pole” he had made to protest Exxon’s actions during and after the spill. The pole depicted dead eagles, herring with lesions, the head of an Exxon executive, upside down.

Now, Mr. Webber said, “People keep telling me to do a healing pole, but I can’t come up with any characters for it.”