



### Cultural impacts

Oil spills can impact the culture of communities (1-5). “Culture” comprises how people who recognize having shared identities and ways of life make meaning about their world and their place in it.

Oil spills change norms, values, beliefs, and practices that reflect how people think about themselves and their society. Cultural identifiers include aspects of: place, race, history, nationality, language, religious beliefs, ethnicity and aesthetics. For example cultural pride may be linked with local history, traditions, and folklore. A change in these factors may affect how local residents feel about their community.

#### **Disruption of subsistence behavior: *M/V Exxon Valdez***

On March 24, 1989, the supertanker *Exxon Valdez* spilled 10.8 million gallons of crude oil in Prince William Sound, Alaska. The spill is considered one of the largest ecological disasters, destroying rich habitats for salmon, sea otters, seals and seabirds. Alaskan Natives live on the shore of the Prince William Sound, in the Lower Cook Inlet, on Kodiak Island, and on the Alaska Peninsula. They rely on a broad spectrum of marine and land resources. The subsistence harvest of these natural resources is the core cultural foundation of the Native Alaskan lifestyle. Cultural identity was harmed by the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, which continues to contaminate



**Preparation of smoked salmon**

Photo: Nick Hall (8)

#### **Cultural Impacts (6)**

- **Change in cultural values** (ritual system, beliefs, moral rules, traditional activities)
- **Change in cultural practices** (traditional subsistence food gathering)
- **Cultural affront** (disrespect of cultural mores and sacred sites)
- **Lost cultural integrity** (disrespect and inability to continue local culture such as traditions, rites)
- **Cultural marginalization** (exclusion of certain groups based on cultural characteristic)
- **Profanation of culture** (commodification of cultural heritage and associated loss of meaning)
- **Loss of natural and cultural heritage** (damage or destruction natural resources and places of religious, cultural, historical and aesthetic value)

shorelines. Studies have found that Native Alaskans were the most devastated of all groups affected by the spill (1-3).

A subsistence way of life has been defined as “personal, economic, psychological, cultural, communal and religious form of daily living” that is directly linked and “dependent upon the preservation of uncontaminated natural resources, marine life and wildlife” (7). Mitigating loss of subsistence foods is difficult because wild foods can’t be replaced by a processed substitute. Subsistence harvesting maintains kinship and social cohesion. When it is interrupted, these social processes suffer.



## Human Dimensions Impacts of Oil Spills

Subsistence is one of the markers that helps Native people define themselves, but it is neither cosmology nor religion, as western people understand religion and theology (5: 107). The participation in subsistence activities is also about cultural transmission through the teaching of skills and lessons of life, storytelling, and other bonding activities. The survival of the Alaska Natives lifestyle depends on the well-being of the environment and the maintenance of cultural norms of subsistence.

After the *Exxon Valdez* spill, the abundance and diversity of marine resources declined by half (1). This disrupted the cultural calendar of resource cycle availability and cultural traditions, which produced emotional responses (2). Alaska Natives reported feeling outrage, sadness, hurt, confusion, and grief. They also felt concern about seafood contamination and risk of long term health effects. They viewed contamination as the “intrusion of chemical pollutants into the very



**Traditional method of preparing food for winter: drying the salmon harvest** Photo: Nick Hall in (8)

fabric of Alaska Natives' spiritual beliefs and day-to-day behavior” (2: 173). The interruption of subsistence and safety concerns posed by the spill were expressed as follows: “Our elders feel helpless. They cannot do all the activities of gathering food and preparing for the winter. And most of all, they cannot teach their young ones the Native way. How will the children learn the values and the ways if the water is dead? If the water is dead, maybe we are dead, our heritage, our tradition, our ways of life and living and relating to nature and each other” (2: 173).

Interruption of subsistence harvesting activities is not the only type of cultural impact. Native Alaskans around Prince William Sound also suffered other impacts including the intentional destruction of cultural artifacts and relics by disrespectful clean-up crews in addition to ridicule and inequitable treatment. Cultural impacts are pronounced for ethnic groups like Native Alaskans, but can be experienced by other people as well.

### References

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