



## Human Dimensions Impacts of Oil Spills

### Impacts to culture and the spiritual significance of the environment

According to the 2000 census, American Indians and Alaska Natives totaled 2.5 million individuals representing 1.37% of the US population. They comprise a large number of distinct tribes and ethnic groups. Despite their differences, most share common beliefs such as: the existence of a Supreme Creator and a spirit world [1-3], such that the physical world coexists and intermingles with the spirit world. Those beliefs reflect the desire for harmony among the “Creator,” plants, animals, individuals, families, communities and tribes. They also espouse a value system that includes the importance of sharing and generosity, allegiance to one’s family and community, respect for elders, noninterference, orientation to present time and harmony with nature. Societal norms, attitudes and values are passed down generations in story telling, rituals and symbols. The younger learn by watching, listening and observing elders being in harmony with the surrounding nature [2, 3]. The ecological damage caused by an oil spill can alter profoundly Native Americans’ identities and ways of life. It can change behaviors and accentuate taboos, resulting in conflicts. It can exacerbate concerns about intergenerational relationships and learning. It can challenge beliefs that guide and rationalize one’s cognition of themselves and their tribe [4-6].

#### Impacts

- Inter-generational differences because of inability to pass along cultural practices
- Loss of traditional knowledge and skills
- Deep feelings of loss and grief
- Intra-tribal conflict over norms

#### Impacting the spiritual significance of the environment: *M/V Exxon Valdez*



**Chief Marie Smith Jones was the last native speaker of the Eyak language (1918 - 2008).** Unknown photograph

On March 24, 1989, the supertanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground releasing over 10.8 million gallons of oil in Prince William Sound, Alaska. The response failed to contain the oil and over 1180 miles of Alaskan coastline were polluted [5]. The oil spill was devastating to marine mammals, shorebirds, fish, and local wildlife. It is estimated that over 250,000 seabirds, 144 bald eagles, 4400 sea otters, 30 seals, and 20 whales perished immediately after exposure to the oil [7]. The devastation persisted with sharp declines in salmon and herring populations. Native and non-native Alaskans were affected by the contamination. Both groups have used the

Sound for subsistence and commercial fishing. The experience of these impacts has varied according to their use and relation to the Prince William Sound.

Many Native Alaskans organize their lives according to seasons and natural cycles. Families come together and disperse according to the rhythm of hunting animals and gathering plants. They reunite for subsistence activities in preparation for the winter months. Those activities are also important for cultural preservation through the teaching of skill, moral, and identity forming



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activities [8]. The survival of the Native Alaskans' lifestyle depends on the well-being of the environment. A strong spiritual dimension is prevalent in their relationship with the ecology of Prince William Sound and there is a strong sense that the health of the tribe is linked to the health of nature.

Their view of the ecological destruction caused by the oil spill was grounded in a complex understanding of the world where humans and creatures live in harmony in a spiritual world. They experienced the massive and meaningless death of thousands of living creatures as a personal and spiritual loss [6]. A Native Alaskan man stated:

I was there right after the spill. We picked up dying animals, tried to capture dying birds . . . everything was dying. If you could have seen this, you would have cried like I did (participant chokes, long pause). My heart was heavy . . . a piece of me died out there. . . . I will never forget how precious the Sound is to me [6, p. 87].

Many native Alaskans, regardless of their tribe, had a dialogue of apology, concern and sorrow for the destruction of the Prince William Sound ecosystem [5, 6]. In ritual held in 1996, spiritual leaders asked all the living creatures of the Sound, particularly the sea otters, to forgive those responsible.

We are here to visit our brother, the sea otter; we are here to apologize for the needless death caused by oil in the water. Our hearts have been saddened by the misery you suffered. We are here to apologize to you. . . go . . . go into the water and tell the seal, the sea-lion, the eagle, the fish . . . tell all that live in the Sound that we ask forgiveness and are truly sorry for the black death that came in 1989 [6, p. 87].

In this perspective, the spill not only killed the bodies of the creatures, but also their souls. This grief spilled over into negative behaviors and social conflicts within local Native communities. One tribal member of the Eyak mentioned:

We argue with our brothers and turn our backs on Native ways. The spill has made us angry; it has soiled our souls [6, p. 90].

The spill's ecological destruction continues to have a strong harmful impact on essential cultural and spiritual traditions. The generation that has grown up after the spill is significantly different from their parent's generation, in part because of the interruption in traditional tribal activities because of the spill.



'Sea Otter' - Patrick Amos - Serigraphy on paper. Alaska Northwest Coast Native Art

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