

# The oil spill really hurts the people

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The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill has been devastating to the people of Prince William Sound.

Yet, as the statistics on the destruction of the sound by the oil spill continue to mount, much of the focus continues to be on the natural environment with little critical examination of its effects on our people.

In part, this is because the effects on the natural environment are easier to measure: counting dead birds and miles of affected shoreline is inherently less difficult than attempting to value the loss of our livelihoods and lifestyles.

While many individuals are quick to point out that no people have died from the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, few have focused on the loss of our subsistence and commercial fishing ways of life. This is the death that more than 2,000 rural residents, commercial fishermen and especially Alaska Natives must accept.

The implications of this loss will be felt by individuals and families for years to come and will be reflected in a growing body of statistics on economic failure, family stress and personal tragedy.

## OPINION



Gone with the fish, herring roe, seals, sea otters, porpoises, shellfish, ducks, geese and plants are the opportunities to continue the traditions of subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering and the opportunities to commercial fish. And, until the environment returns to its natural state, the subsistence and commercial lifestyles in Prince William Sound will be altered immeasurably.

Commercial fishing is the main way that the people of this area supplement their subsistence incomes. The Prince William Sound commercial fisheries include three salmon fisheries, five

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herring fisheries, five shellfish fisheries and the bottomfish fishery.

The number of permit holders for these fisheries include 634 in Cordova, 85 in Valdez, 83 in Homer and 50 in Seward. While there are fewer permits held by fishermen in the smaller Prince William Sound communities, the impact is even greater because the income from commercial fisheries supports larger families and goes further in these communities with limited cash income.

These communities include Chenega Bay, Tatitlek, Eyak, Port Graham, English Bay and Seldovia.

Already, seven fisheries have been closed due to the oil spill. As each fishery is closed, the loss to residents of coastal communities increases. And, while they may be able to recover the income losses through damages, the loss of lifestyle and environment is less easy to measure or compensate for.

These are but a few of the short-term effects. There are many unanswered questions, and the long-term effects are even more uncertain.

What we do know, though, is that we must heed the tragic lessons from the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. While we may have some hard-won laws that are intended to protect the environment and the right of rural Alaskans to subsistence fish and hunt, these laws are of little value if the natural resources are at risk due to inadequate industry and government protections.

We cannot undo what has occurred in Prince William Sound, but we can and we must do everything possible to clean up the oil spill, rebuild the natural habitat and prevent it from happening again.

Our commitment to taking the necessary action to correct the problems must not waiver. If it does, we will find that the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill will not be an isolated event.