



Andy Teal, right, discusses with a reporter the extent of regrowth on Latouche Island after the March 24, 1989, oil spill.

# Oiled beaches *look* cleaner

by Geoff Kennedy  
for the Tundra Times

Prince William Sound beaches look a lot cleaner — at least on the surface — a year after being oiled by the *Exxon Valdez* spill.

That's the conclusion of representatives of Exxon, the Coast Guard and the state Department of Environmental Conservation during a media tour of five oiled beaches last week.

The on-scene coordinator for DEC, Steve Provant, said the scene at Smith Island impressed him.

It was, he said, "a lot better than the last time." Only a few patches of oil remained on the surface of the beach on the northeastern side of the island. Most of the remaining oil had seeped several inches beneath the surface, Provant said.

"This oil looks less weathered — brown, moussy, thicker than when I was here the 10th of February."

Provant called the area "Quayle Beach." Vice President Dan Quayle spent 10 minutes there last year. At that time, Provant said, there was a lot

of oil lay on the surface, the shoreline was very porous and a lot of oil had already seeped under the heavy boulders along the shore.

He said workers last year scoured the beach with hot water from high-pressure hoses, laid absorbent pads on the oil and applied bio-remediation, a process of using natural fertilizers and other elements to speed the disintegration of the oil.

DEC calls the beach a "high-energy site." Storms and waves up to 5 feet

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high often crash against the shore and scour oil from the rocks.

"Storms change the beach overnight," said Andy Teal of Exxon. The rounded shape of the rocks indicated that frequent waves have scoured the jagged and pointed edges off the rocks.

Teal said he was surprised to see how clean the beach had become along a section of Latouche Island washed by Sleepy Bay. Oil had covered an estimated 95 percent of the area and had seeped 4 to 12 inches beneath the pebbles along the beach.

Cleanup workers had successfully removed most of the oil from the surface, Teal said. Exxon last year treated the beach by spraying hot and cold water and by applying a bio-remediation agent, Inipol EAP 22.

Most of the beach appeared clean. But a moderately oiled gravel patch lined a narrow stream on the beach. Teal said the patch contained the heaviest concentration of oil on any of the beaches on the media tour.

"We'll have to remove this stuff by hand," he said. Last year oil workers removed tons of oiled rocks and had them shipped to disposal sites in Oregon, Teal said.

The oiled beach lies adjacent to a salmon-spawning area and east of the Saw Mill Bay Hatchery on neighboring Evans Island.

Provant was impressed with the recovery of a stretch of beach on Eleanor Island at the southern end of Northwest Bay.

He described the scene as "pretty darn good." The beach, he said, was one of the first hit by the 11 million gallons spilled by the *Exxon Valdez*.

Last summer workers scoured the area with warm water, laid absorbent pad on the oiled surface and applied bio-remediation.

Provant said scientists don't have enough data to determine the environmental effects of the high-pressure hosing. That action can kill a lot of organisms under rocks and pebbles, he said, but the oil already



photos by Janet Kamm



Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Ernest Del Buono, above left, holds an oil absorbent pad left over from last summer's cleanup, while Andy Teal, examines growth of barnacles on rocks with a Japanese television crew.

may have killed such organisms, anyway.

Provant found barnacles and snails in a small pool of water away from the tide. A photographer also found a tiny worm under one of the rocks on the shore. Provant said he wasn't surprised. He has a collection of oiled rocks at home, he said, and he's seen a worm wriggling in the heavily oiled water.

Provant said officials also don't know how well bio-remediation works in cold places, such as Alaska.

"We don't know how long it's going to be before the area is recovered," he said.

Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Ernest Del Buono recalled a massive cleanup operation on the island last summer.

A very different situation existed on the south arm of Knight Island. A marsh near a rock-strewn beach prevented workers from mounting a large operation from off-shore. Instead, a small work crew spent only a few days applying hot-water wands, pom-poms and absorbent pads to the environmentally sensitive area.

"Right now, this is one of the worst-looking areas," Provant said. To add to the problem, no winter storms hit the area, he said. For these reasons, he said, a considerable amount of oil remained on and beneath the surface. In fact, he said, unlike other beaches, the appearance of the beach didn't improve and may have become worse.

In the marsh I found pockets of heavy tar. The oil here on Knight

Island was thicker than in any of the other places on the tour.

DEC and Exxon each selected two of the sites on the tour. The tour also touched down for a few minutes on Block Island for the helicopters to refuel. On that site, oil stains stretched along the side of a small cliff.

This week, assessment teams of state, Exxon and federal officials and scientists will inspect areas oiled last year along 398 miles of Prince William Sound. The inspection will help officials decide the extent to which they'll try to clean oiled beaches this year.

Assessment teams will also tour environmentally sensitive areas not oiled last year, Provant said.