

Spill's consequences are 'crushing'

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I saw Prince William Sound for the first time shortly after I moved to Alaska in 1982. That summer the U.S. Forest Service wanted some publicity on a salmon habitat enhancement project they were building at Knight Island, so they flew me over to the island to write about it.

OPINION

I was impressed with the Forest Service's work, but I was absolutely enchanted with Knight Island. I had never before seen such a beautiful, peaceful place. Words fail me as I try to describe the delicate scenes I saw during that weekend in 1982.

At the time, I described Knight Island as "a true paradise of wildlife, tucked away in the heart of the Chugach National Forest." I pointed out that black bear and Sitka blacktail deer are among the largest wildlife species found there, but that the island supports an abundance of other plants and animals as well.

The aim of the Forest Service project was to build a fish pass and resting pools, allowing salmon to get from the Bay of Isles up into Otter Creek and the 50-acre Otter Lake.

Forest Service officials don't have a big enough Alaska budget to do these things whenever they feel like it. The projects take years of planning. They start with reconnaissance surveys of possible sites the first year. The second year is spent in engineering and biological surveys to identify a site and verify whether it's truly feasible. The third year focuses on design and on-site verification of plans; and finally construction takes place in the fourth year.

The construction phase of the Otter Creek fish pass took a crew of about a dozen people working for almost two months. The annual precipitation of more than 140 inches made the work difficult.

Other things added to the problems to be overcome. Two men carried 200-pound fish pass sections across a log bridge over Otter Creek — quite a feat in raingear and a downpour.

When I first heard about the oil catastrophe in Prince Williams Sound I was unable to grasp the situation. I couldn't picture what it meant. But as



U.S. Forest Service photo

The Bay of Isles at Knight Island, shown in a 1982 photo, is one of the areas most affected by the oil spill.

the days went on, as I read news reports, as I talked to people, as I listened to the radio, the harsh reality began to sink in.

I think I was most affected by this oil spill when I learned that among the places expected to be hardest hit is the village of Chenega. I interviewed leaders of this village in 1984. At the time, they were very excited about the fact that they were finally rebuilding their village which had been destroyed by the tidal wave accompanying the 1964 earthquake.

Having fallen in love with Knight Island, it was easy for me to see why they were willing to work so hard to rebuild their home.

Although I never traveled to Chenega because of the expense involved in going there, I pictured it in my mind. Having witnessed the hard work it took the Forest Service to build the fish pass, I was struck with what it must have taken to build an entire village from scratch.

I talked recently with Ken Holbrook, fisheries biologist with the Petersburg Ranger District of the

Forest Service. It was Holbrook who was single-handedly responsible for the Forest Service's projects on Knight Island.

"The Bay of Isles is filled with oil," he said.

Holbrook is only repeating what he has heard. When I talked to him he was on his way to Valdez, to head up the Forest Service's team working on the oil spill. Those words, however, gave me a sick feeling.

They seemed incredible to think about when I reread what I wrote in 1982. That year I quoted a Forest Service official explaining why the Knight Island camp was a no-frills place to stay.

"You need to make it livable, but not damaging to the site. A lot of traffic for a month and a half could leave scars that would last for years," he said.

What will the "scars" be now, thanks to the oil spill?

I'm not suggesting that the work done by the Forest Service in 1982 was one of the more important things ever done in Prince William Sound.

The project I saw was really relatively modest. It was aimed at adding 4,000 reds and 800 silvers annually to Alaskan catches.

I'm also not suggesting that it's a disaster if a few thousand salmon fry going from Otter Creek and Sockeye Creek into the Bay of Isles die when they reach the oiled saltwater.

What I'm trying to say is that the tragedy of the Prince William Sound oil spill is the story of the Forest Service work on Knight Island multiplied, who knows how many times? A thousand? Ten thousand?

Most Alaskans probably have their own "Prince William Sound story."

We who don't live there, however, can get by without many of the things this oil spill has destroyed.

The people who live there, however, will be forever changed. The people of Chenega can't get by without the wildlife they depend on to survive.

If you add it all together, the consequences are enormous.

"It's crushing," Holbrook said. "It's pretty hard to pin down your feelings."