

# Oil spill threatens villages, wildlife

## Tatitlek leaders not informed for days after spill

by Jennifer Gordon  
Tundra Times reporter

For the people of the village of Tatitlek in Prince William Sound, subsistence has always been a way of life.

Now, as the sound becomes more and more contaminated with oil from the wrecked *Exxon Valdez*, the very environment that gave them life could be dying.

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Martha Valasoff of Tatitlek said news of the oil spill was slow in getting to the village of about 100 people. She said the only reason she knew that anything was wrong on Good Friday was that there were a large number of boats, helicopters and planes in the area. The wreck happened only four miles from the village, but it was blocked from their view by Bligh Island across the Tatitlek Narrows.

The next day, March 25, the spill was much more obvious.

"It was like standing over a barrel of oil and breathing the fumes," said Valasoff. She said she had learned more of the spill by then from "Good Morning America" on television, but no one had approached the village with answers to the many questions they were asking.

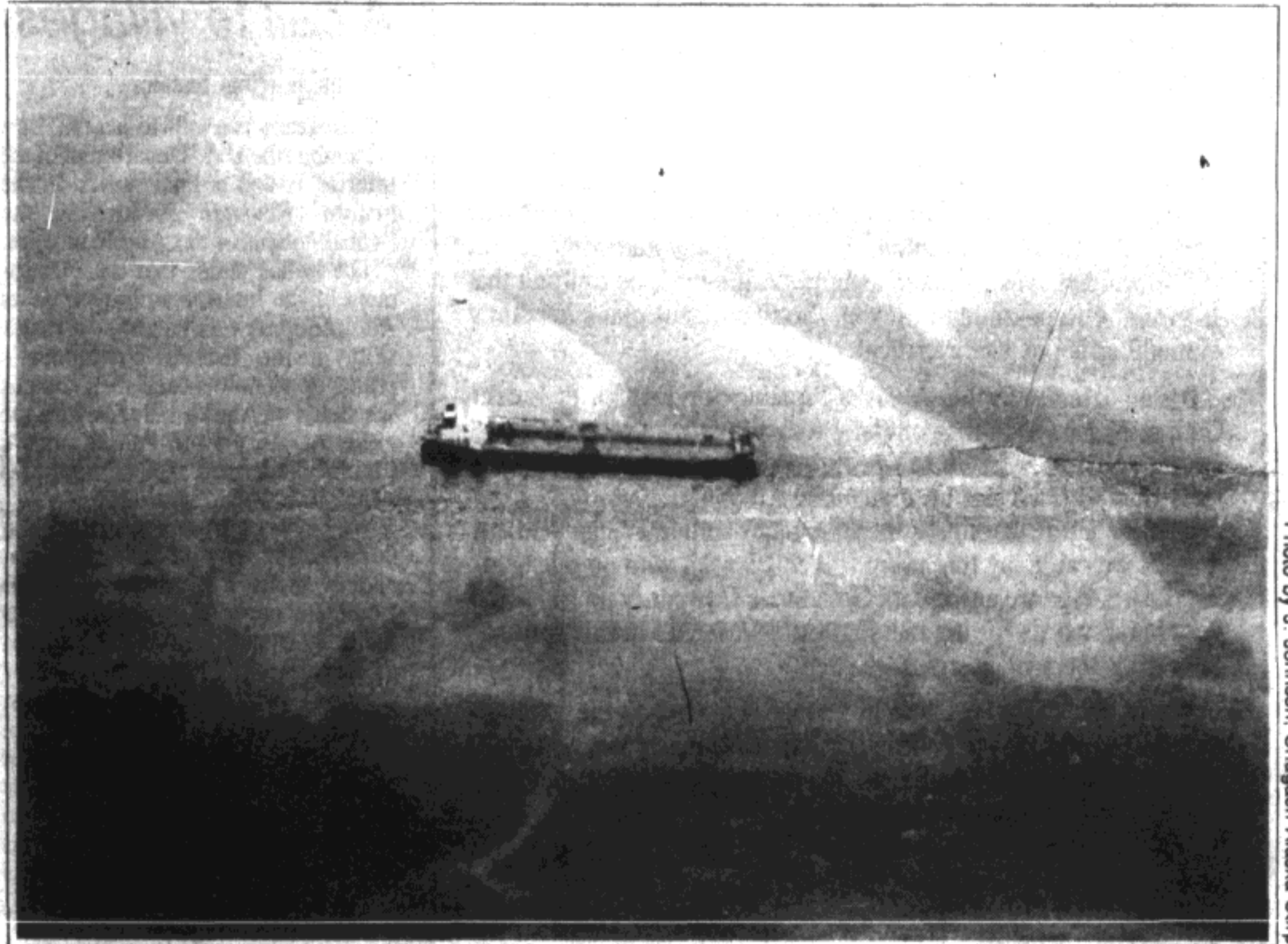


Photo by J. Johnson, Chugach Alaska Corp.

*The Exxon Valdez spews 11 million gallons of oil March 24, the day the tanker rammed into Bligh Reef.*

Valasoff said the wind picked up on March 26, and there was some relief from the strong fumes. In the afternoon, however, a test burn done by Exxon blew smoke into the village.

No one in the village was notified of the burn, and the villagers were not told whether the smoke was toxic, she said.

Valasoff said her husband and the other men in Tatitlek have been working long hours to protect the village. She said he came in around 10 p.m. March 26 and left in his 32-foot gillnetter around 4 the next morning.

Despite the confusion and anger in the village, Valasoff said it was a blessing that the oil had not made it

to Tatitlek's shores.

"Praise the Lord," she said.

Even if the oil never hits the village's shoreline, their subsistence survival could be seriously in jeopardy. Valasoff said that many of the men in the village fish for herring and col-

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# • Tatitlek fears spill

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lect the roe, an industry that now looks doomed from the oil contamination.

There are no stores in Tatitlek. If a person is hungry, he goes out and hunts seal or deer, catches salmon or digs for shellfish. But villagers are worried they may starve looking for food that hasn't been affected, or get sick if they continue their lifestyle, she said.

Valasoff said that she and her husband had been using up the last of their supply of salmon, getting ready for this year's record run. But the salmon this year are a question now.

Will they be contaminated? Will they die before reaching the village?

She said villagers also hunt deer on Bligh Island, but since the deer eat the seaweed on the shores, they could be affected as well. Valasoff said she is worried that there won't be any more steamer clams, and no one has decided how the oil will affect the seals.

"I wish someone would just tell us what is going on," Valasoff said.

Paul Costello, land manager for Tatitlek, said he was also frustrated with the lack of information to the village.

He said an Exxon specialist on burning the oil sat for almost the whole day in the village on March 25, but no one explained who he was until after the man left.

Costello said that many of the men

in the village had been hired to help with the spill, which will help the families financially for awhile, but they don't know yet whether Exxon will compensate the subsistence villages for their losses.

Mike Chittick, president and chief executive officer of Chugach Alaska Corp., said that Chugach Alaska is working closely with a specialist for the Department of Environmental Conservation. That staffer is in Valdez working with Exxon on behalf of the villages in the area.

Chittick said the corporation is discussing how to make sure shareholders are compensated for their losses. In addition, Chugach is looking into the employment opportunities made available from the spill.

Three villages in the Chugach region — Tatitlek, Chenega and Eyak — are expected to be dramatically affected by the spill.

Chittick said Chugach employees were monitoring and documenting the situation last week.

Chugach Alaska's board members met Friday to discuss further action on the spill.

Derenty Tabios, executive director for North Pacific Rim, the nonprofit corporation for Chugach, said on March 28 that they were standing by to help, but couldn't get hold of Gary Kompcoff, president of Tatitlek's village council. He said that the phone lines were so jammed that it was dif-

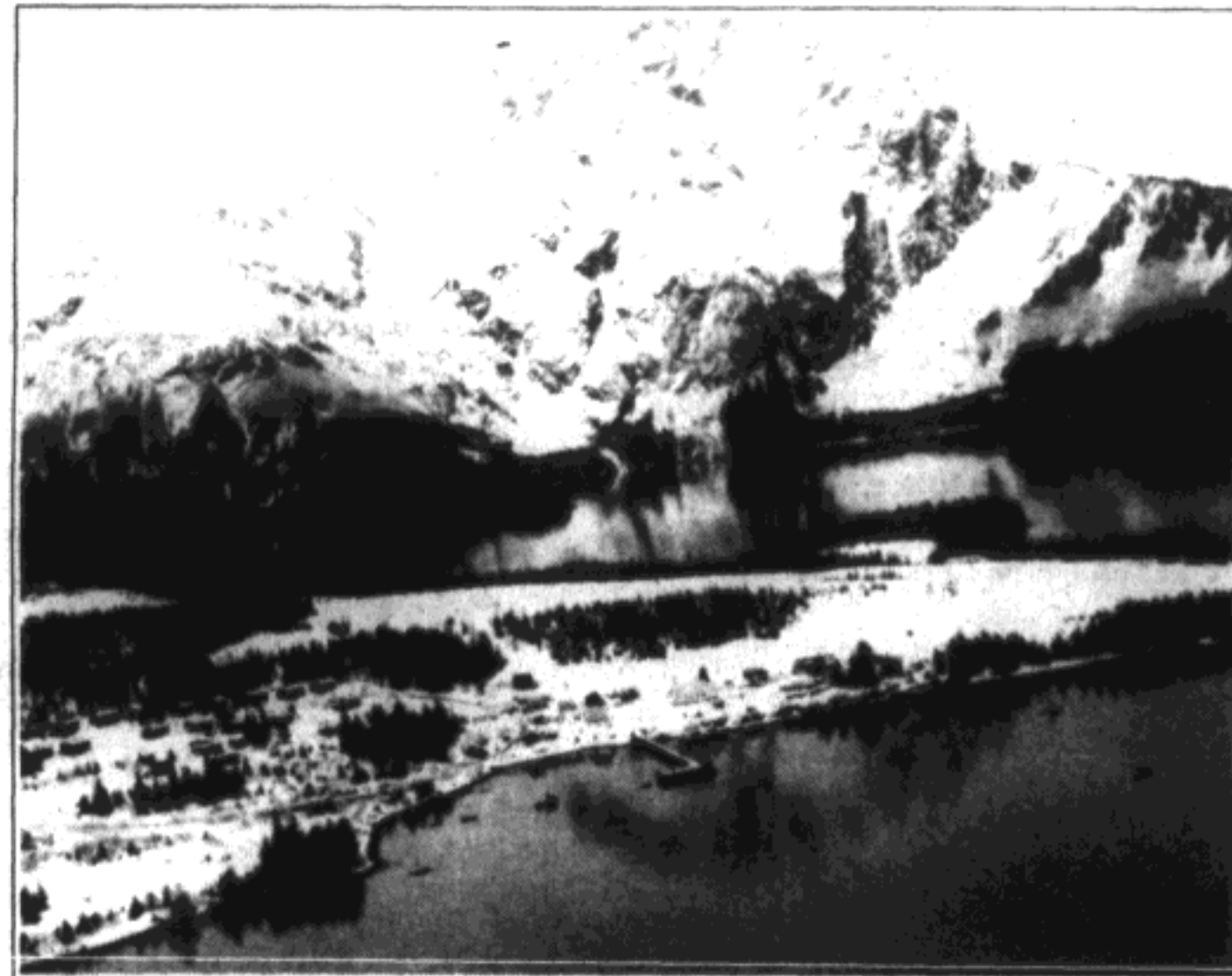


photo by J. Jonsson, Chugach Alaska Corp.

*Tatitlek is shown in a photo taken the day before the tanker struck the reef.*

ficult to get a line in to the village.

Steven Behnke, director of the Division of Subsistence of the Department of Fish and Game, said his agency is trying to do everything possible to protect the wildlife in the sound. The real work, however, will be determining the long-term affects the spill will have on the area, he said.

Behnke said that Chenega may have more of a problem than Tatitlek if the oil holds its southerly course.

Lee Stratton, a subsistence resource specialist for the subsistence division, said the division plans to work with the villages using baseline maps that show where they normally hunt and

fish. She said they will mainly look at marine mammals, salmon, game, bottom fish and rock fish in the study.

James Fall, the Anchorage regional supervisor for the subsistence division, said staffers had finished a similar map for the subsistence fishermen in Cordova only last month.

He said the project was not quite complete, but that the information is available for the community.

Fall said the biggest problem the division may run into is funding for the extra work to be done in the sound. He said he did not know at this time if the funds would be made available.