WILDLIFE AND ENVIRONMENT

The Alaska Oil Spill
A close-up view of a disaster

Alaska, in many ways, is the most beautiful place on earth. Take Valdez, for example—where glaciers run like rivers nearly across roads, meadows rise on seemingly vertical mountain-sides above the town, and people watch a mother black bear raise two cubs. On the roads to Valdez, you dodge moose and caribou, among other animals, never far from the oil pipeline paralleling the road.

What a contrast is this splendor with the death and destruction in the ramshackle Fish and Wildlife Service refrigerated trailer in Valdez, where dead oiled birds are being warehoused since the Exxon oil tanker disaster of late March. Thousands of birds, including bald eagles and pigeon guillemots, and mammals, such as sea otters, are all oiled beyond recognition. Also in town, hidden among the smaller, nondescript buildings, are the newly opened federal offices of the National Marine Fisheries Service, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and the United States Forest Service. There is an Otter Rescue Center and a Wild Bird Rescue Center as well. All exist because of our nation’s worst single environmental disaster, the nightmare of the Exxon Valdez’s 11.1 million gallons of oil spilled in Prince William Sound.

In early May 1989, I visited Alaska on behalf of The HSUS, which has fourteen years of experience in rehabilitating oil-spill victims, to take a first-hand look at the devastation and find out what we could do to help. I thought that I had prepared myself for the destruction that I would see. I was wrong.

When I arrived in Valdez, late in the evening, just at dark, I was struck by the crowded bars and tent cities that housed the workers, people hired by Exxon to help clean up the oil spill and deal with the consequences. The city was simply teeming with life. There was not a room to be had in local hotels and motels. CBS and ABC had taken over much of the communication facilities of the city.

With daylight, my first visit was to the Wild Bird Rescue Center, where a dedicated worker, Bruce Atkins, showed me around. In early May, the spill was shifting from Valdez down to Seward and points beyond. The Wild Bird Center, guarded by an Exxon employee and directed by Alice Berkner, was filled with energy. The walls were papered with letters and cards received from concerned children and other citizens from around the nation with messages such as “keep up the good work,” and “we’re with you.”

The other thing that struck me about this facility was the paucity of sick birds there. When I asked why, the angered and frustrated response was that most of the birds were dead. It was at that point I learned that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and volunteers had picked up some 6,000 dead birds. (Current estimates are 13,000 dead.) These birds died...
either from being oiled directly or from ingesting oiled food or water; they had succumbed to the cold, the oil, and the inevitability of death.

Alice Berkner normally directs The International Bird Rescue Research Center in Berkeley, California, where she does a truly outstanding job. She was hired by Exxon to direct the oiled-bird portion of the clean-up effort. Tired from working long hours in the stressful Valdez environment, Ms. Berkner was devastated by what she had seen—the tragedy of the destruction and the futility of trying to clean up oiled birds. The small number of birds that had been treated in the center demonstrates the futility of it all. We cannot clean up this tragedy, we cannot save the birds. Every life saved is precious, but the reality is that oil, water, and wildlife produces unmerciful death. At the time of my visit, the Wild Bird Rescue facility had taken in only 403 oiled birds; 124 had been released and 277 had died in spite of the care they received. Some of the birds were common types, some uncommon—the beautiful rhinoceros auklet, Barrow’s goldeneye, pelagic and red-faced cormorants, Kittlitz’s murrelet, the marbled murrelet, the old squaw duck, pigeon guillemots, glaucous-winged gulls, and bald eagles. The disaster was total.

I moved on to the Otter Rehabilitation Center, where the situation was much the same and equally distressing. If the Wild Bird Rescue Center could have been characterized as a well-run volunteer effort, the otter center could be described as a high-tech, well-financed operation. The director was Dr. Randy Davis, an otter expert on contract from a branch of Sea World. The otter-rescue operation nearly breathed money. It had computers, tanks, water-warming facilities, and a food production line (for otters) that rivaled many college cafeterias. Dr. Davis announced proudly that Exxon had spent $5 million on the Valdez Otter Rescue Center to date. Only 153 otters had been put through the facility: 80 had died, 20 had been released, and 52 were still on hand (1 was missing). Assuming that all otters still on hand were eventually released, Exxon, at that time, would have spent $5 million to save 70 otters. As one employee told me confidentially, these otters are the only decent public relations that Exxon has gotten out of the whole oil spill. As nearly as I could tell, that was certainly true.

Otters being rehabilitated are the cutest things that you can imagine, second only to wild otters breaking clams and crabs across their stomachs. These animals are beautiful in every respect, and their beauty only increases the tragedy you feel when you see them oiled and put through days of being scrubbed with detergent, blown dry, and fed with a pair of tongs through a wire-mesh cage. As I was leaving the facility, I stood near some otters loaded in the back of a truck. They were being sent to a “half-way” facility before being released. As I stood there, one ot-
reduce our dependence on oil and reduce
economic pressure for unwise and un-
productive development of Alaska’s
resources. Finally, and most practically,
we should demand an immediate end to
further consideration of oil exploration in
the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Such
development was always a bad idea for
precisely the reasons demonstrated by this
disaster. There is virtually no way to get
that oil out safely. If we don’t develop the
oil now, nothing will be lost. The oil is
not going anywhere. Between now and the
time we need it (if ever that time comes),
we can improve technology to the point
where we can get it out without en-
vironmental destruction.

The message is clear. While we can im-
prove the rescue of oiled animals, there is
no way to handle an oil spill like this one.
The message was clear in Alice Berkner’s
eyes: the tragedy is total. We cannot do
enough, no matter how many well-
meaning people are involved. There are
not enough people in the world to handle
that kind of tragedy. The lesson from this
is clear: such an oil spill must
never hap-
pen again.—Dr. John W. Grandy, HSUS
vice president for wildlife and the environ-
ment.

An otter recovering from an injured spine is one of seventy possible survivors of Ex-
xon’s $5 million effort to rehabilitate the wildlife of Prince William Sound.

What help can we give to that otter or
to the birds? The estimated otter popula-
tion in Prince William Sound, before the
oil spill, was 10,000 or more. To date, be-
tween 4,000 and 6,000, at least, have died.
No one knew what the population of
aquatic and shore birds was, but the
estimates are that between one hun-
dred thousand to two hundred thousand
have died. The stark reminder is in the
refrigerated trailer next to the Fish and
Wildlife Service’s Valdez offices. You can
smell the death fifty yards away. There are
deer, ducks, guillemots, murrels, murre-
lets, puffins—birds many of us will never
even see—the most beautiful horned and
tufted puffins you can imagine. All are
blackened beyond life.

What can we do? We can demand laws
and restrictions with which to prevent this
kind of tragedy. We can demand adequate
enforcement of regulations and new
regulations that are stronger and stricter.
These would include double hulls on
tankers that transport oil through critical
wildlife habitats, such as Prince William
Sound. At a more mundane, but very im-
portant, level we can demand fuel-saving
restrictions in automobiles and on
highways. Lower speed limits and higher
gas mileage for cars are necessary to
reduce economic pressure for unwise and un-
productive development of Alaska’s

The cormorant being washed in an earlier photo takes its ease on the edge of a tank
at the Wild Bird Rescue Center. Only 124 of 403 birds treated survived.