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Tragedy in Alaska Waters

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Photographs by NATALIE FOBES



IT WAS virtually impossible, they said. No major spill could take place in Prince William Sound. But should the impossible happen, emergency procedures would quickly minimize any damage—so claimed the companies and agencies responsible for ships carrying oil through Alaska's unspoiled waters.

That was before the tanker *Exxon Valdez* ripped open its bottom on Bligh Reef. Oil fountained out of its hull as **10.9 million gallons** of North Slope crude poured into the sound.



Offloading the remaining 42 million gallons began almost immediately. But two days after the accident deployment of containment booms was pitifully ineffectual (above).

Workers tried to protect the shoreline (opposite), but equipment that was supposed to be on hand was in short supply. When winds spread the slick, it became inevitable that shellfish and thousands of sea otters and seabirds such as a common murre (right) would die. The catastrophe that couldn't happen became a nightmarish reality.





FEW REGIONS of North America's coast have more to lose from such a devastating environmental blow. And few would be more difficult to clean up. The gantlet of islands that forms Prince William Sound (map, left) slows the natural cleansing process that takes place on beaches exposed to heavy surf. Alaska's frigid water keeps oil from breaking down as quickly as it would in warmer seas. Gravel beaches along the rocky shoreline absorb oil, which then leaks out for months or years.

The sound is home to whales, porpoises, seals, sea lions, and one of North America's greatest concentrations of sea otters—an estimated 10,000 before the spill. Some 400,000 resident birds are joined in spring by a million migrating seabirds and ten million waterfowl and shorebirds. Brown bears, Sitka black-tailed deer, and thousands of bald eagles live along the forested shores. Five species of Pacific salmon spawn in hatcheries or in streams that empty into the sound, also a prime area for herring, shrimp, and bottom fish. Fishermen who had expected a 1989 harvest of 120 million dollars faced an uncertain future.

A harvest of death awaited fishermen who were among the first on the scene to pull dead and dying animals from the water. Soaked in oil, a pigeon guillemot crouching among coated rocks (left) died soon after it was found. Hardest hit of marine mammals were sea otters (right), poisoned by oil or killed by hypothermia as their oil-soaked fur lost its insulating properties. Veterinarians, technicians, and volunteers at rescue centers funded by Exxon treated otters and birds brought in by boats, planes, and helicopters.

No phase of the sad event has

been without controversy. Contingency plans for dealing with a spill have been on file since the 1970s, when Congress gave the go-ahead for the trans-Alaska pipeline from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez. But after 12 years of relatively trouble-free operations these plans proved to be a paper reality only. Round-the-clock response teams had been demobilized, and equipment that should have been ready was far away or nonexistent. Faced with the **worst oil spill in U. S. history**, corporations and state



and federal agencies responsible seemed uncertain about who should take command, and critical time was lost.

Left untreated and uncontained, the oil combined with water to form a floating "mousse," deadly and uncontrollable. A large part of the gooey mat eventually oozed through straits and channels to open water, spreading tendrils of pollution to Kodiak Island and beyond. Where it landed on beaches, the danger remained that high tides or storm winds

would refloat the oil to coat new areas. While lighter elements of the oil quickly evaporated, some poisonous compounds may have entered the water column, with unknown consequences for fish and bottom life.

Never before has such a sensitive natural showcase been so massively and suddenly violated. The victimized sound has become an unfortunate laboratory for scientific research. Studies now under way will help authorities understand the impact of oil upon the biological

galaxy of creatures in coastal waters. Public outcry has focused scrutiny on industry's invasion of wilderness.

A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC team, arriving the day after the spill, continues to monitor events and will present a complete report on the accident and its aftermath in an upcoming issue. One lesson is frighteningly clear: **Current equipment and techniques are hopelessly inadequate to master so rapid and large a spill.** And well-laid plans too easily become unkept promises. □

