



February 28, 2008

exxon

Crudely irresponsible

The oil spill happened nearly 20 years ago, but still soaks into the lives of the people of Cordova, Ala.

By Kelsey Kudak

The beauty of living in a small town is that it's always small. You can come home and nothing has changed." But for Coon Rapids resident and Cordova, Alaska native, Virgil Carroll, this has hardly been the case for the last 19 years. Traveling home for Thanksgiving last fall, he found the morale of the town lower than usual. Exxon had filed another appeal urging the Supreme Court to eliminate claims of punitive damages, and extended a battle the town has been fighting since 1994 when the company first appealed 5 billion dollars in damages. After the company's latest appeal, its dues were halved to \$2.5 billion in federal court. Yesterday, the case was finally heard in the Supreme Court and it is hoped to be settled by summertime.

It has been nearly 20 years since the Exxon's irresponsibility led to an 11 million gallon oil spill in the Prince William Sound of Alaska in March of 1989. The Exxon Valdez, a 1,000 square foot tanker, ran into the Bligh Reef and ruptured its tanks. And the spill, which happened under the order of a drunken officer, despoiled immaculate Alaskan wilderness. After countless complaints to the company and the failure to complete a 28-day mandatory alcohol treatment program, Officer Hazelwood was not even at the helm of his tanker when the ship hit the reef. He'd left charge to a third mate who was incapable of proper navigation, and with an estimated BAC of .241 Hazelwood was in no position to navigate himself. Once an individual is an alcoholic, he or she is always an alcoholic. It is illegal to operate a car with a BAC of .08 in all 50 states. What then, of an industrial oil tanker?

According to a University of Alaska study, only one quarter of the area's marine life survived the tragedy. According to Alaska conservation organization, the Prince William Soundkeeper, the spill was one of the largest environmental disasters in the history of the United States. It took three years of "unprecedented efforts" before the area showed a significant decline in contamination and only seven in 26 monitored species and resources have recovered to "pre-spill" health abundance. But for the people of Cordova, the oil spill still soaks crudely into their lives.

One man interviewed by The Whole Truth Campaign for the Prince William Sound spoke of the atrocity saying, "I watched a lot of animals die - especially the loons. They took a long time; they'd cry for about a week and then die. It was terrible. I don't like to talk about it very much." Carroll was a senior in high school in 1989 and was part of the effort to pick up the mess. But the days of his father, brother and himself were only intermittent with success. Their family's skimmer could only hold a couple hundred gallons of oil and there was no proper place to deposit the waste. They consequently spent more time waiting for disposal than skimming the water. In the end only 14 percent of the oil was reclaimed.

In 2008, he cannot have a conversation in his hometown without mention of the spill. While the news stations flashed the nation with images of oiled ducks and black waters in 1989, the memory of the event is fuzzier for the lower 48 states. The Whole Truth Campaign was created by Cordova residents; though Carroll is the CEO of High Monkey Company that created the site, he is foremost "the proud son of a fisherman." "The idea behind the Whole Truth," he said, "is to remember." Exxon, however, wants to forget without the forgiveness part.

"I often say it's too bad this didn't happen in a place like New York, because it would have been taken care of. But it happened to a small town of 2,300 people," said Carroll. While the summers have begun to rebound, Cordova is a ghost town in the winter. Many in the town can no longer afford to live in a place where a gallon of milk costs \$5. By 1994, local Herring population had disappeared and taken the means of many families' income. What remains in the town are the remnants of Exxon's slapdash effort to fix the spill. Buildings were taken over to house the thousands of people brought to the town for clean up effort. The local dance hall was turned into a dormitory, and while it is still used for local meetings, teens no longer frequent the place. "I always say Exxon did a great job at making people think they were doing a good job," he said. Photographs of rock polishers cleaning oil from beaches were outrageously staged. According to National Public Radio's "Morning Edition," the coastline affected by the spill spans roughly the length of Washington D.C. to Atlanta. How many miles of rocks can one person wipe clean?

Exxon's opportunity to clean their greasy fingers began yesterday, as the case of \$2.5 billion punitive damages was heard in a special 90-minute Supreme Court session. The company is the 25th largest entity in the world (including countries), and while \$2.5 billion seems a large sum, only represents three weeks of net profit. Broken down further, each of the plaintiffs would receive \$76,500. For the residents of Cordova, the settlement isn't about the money; it is about Exxon owning up to their statement to the town in 1989 when it promised to do all it could "make the town whole again." It is a way to move on.

Kelsey Kudak welcomes comments at kkudak@mndaily.com.