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## When the water died, Chugach peoples lost cornerstone of culture

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For The Cordova Times

*Editor's note: These remarks were made at the Whole Truth press conference in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday, Feb. 26.*

My Alutiiq name is Yatahowuq. I am a tribal member of the Native Village of Tatitlek, of the Chugach Region, which extends across the heavily oiled beaches of Prince William Sound and Lower Cook Inlet.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share the Whole Truth of the Exxon Valdez oil spill and how it continues to impact our communities. My time with you today will focus on the effects associated with the loss of our traditional subsistence practices, which could no longer be sustained following the disaster.

I want to start by elaborating on the importance of subsistence in our culture. Subsistence is more than stocking the freezer; it is more than what we would prefer to eat. Subsistence is a cornerstone of our culture; it helps to establish our identity, and is regarded as a sacred practice throughout the Chugach region.

To emphasize this point, I would like to read from a speech delivered by the late chief of the Native Village of Port Graham and Chugach Alaska Corp. original incorporator, Walter Meganack Sr.

In his speech "Coping with the time when the water died," Walter wrote the following:

"The land and the water are our sources of life. The water is sacred. The water is like a baptismal fountain, and its abundance is the Holy Communion of our lives.

"Of all the things we have lost since non-Natives came to our land, we have never lost our connection with the water. The water is our source of life. So long as the water is alive, Chugach Natives are alive."

Later in his speech, Walter goes on to say, "The oil companies lied about preventing a spill. Now they lie about the cleanup. Our people know what happened on the beaches. Spend all day cleaning one huge rock, and the tide comes in and covers it with oil again. Spend a week wiping and spraying the surface, but pick up a rock and there's four inches of oil underneath."

Debate over the dollar value of the cleanup is irrelevant. All that matters is that the cleanup was ineffective.

Reports of the futility of the cleanup effort are shared throughout the Chugach Region. I would like to paraphrase an account by James Kvasnikoff, who is a tribal member of the Native Village of Nanwalek. James remembers:

"Everyone worried about protecting the Native foods, but each time we cleaned more oil would wash up on the beach. It was never ending. Exhausted, the people kept trying to keep up with what was being damaged, just to protect our resources. Regardless of the pollution, we will never lose our desire to harvest."

I would like to take a moment to expand on the health effects linked to the loss of our traditional diet.

It is very difficult to summarize the damage to the mental health to our communities. I can tell you how our social structure was tied to the practice of subsistence gathering, how the traditional foods were part of our identity as a people, or how our cultural values were based on the sharing of traditional foods and harvesting techniques.

Instead, I want to share something that can be easily quantified.

I will read from an e-mail sent to me by Bette Seaman, registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator. Bette has worked for many years with Chugachmiut, a health provider in the Chugach Region. Betty shares the following:

"There was a 200 percent increase in diabetes prevalence in the Chugach region from 1990-2002. This was a figure given to me by Julian Naylor, M.D. an area diabetes consultant at the Alaska Native Medical Center. Since then, our prevalence has continued to increase.

"Even scarier, in some communities almost all adults over the age of 35 have pre-diabetes. If nothing changes, these people will have diabetes in five years."

Our region needs closure. This is a vital component of any healing process. We deserve justice, for all that we have endured and all that we will still endure at the reckless behavior of Exxon.

This is an opportunity for our nation to stand together and demand corporate accountability.

*Travis Lee Vlasock is a tribal member of the Native Village of Tatitlek, a board member of Prince William Soundkeeper and assistant to the chairman of the board of the Tatitlek Corp.*

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