

Exxon Spill: 25 Years of Tears

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By [Shannyn Moore](#), [Shannyn Moore's Blog](#) | *Op-Ed*

Time has a strange affect on events in our lives. I feel I'm looking through a glass of water when I look back 25 years to this day, March 24, 1989.

I'd left Seattle University and the Ballard Lochs on the M/V Westward heading north through the Inside Passage of British Columbia for the sac roe herring fishery in Sitka. No time in my life is etched as clearly as that spring. There is a certain magic about following Spring to Alaska. Per my not so scientific study, I've determined Spring moves at about 9 nautical miles an hour, about the same as the hundred foot boat I worked on. The inside passage is glorious. The bow of the boat pushes Technicolor into black and white. Winter gives up her fight to the brilliance of the whippersnapper called Spring. The smell is of thawing earth. Porpoises danced in the white froth of the bow wake. Pods of whales travelled with us, heading North with their calves to feed on the sweet herring we competed with them for.

Dull voices are a constant on the marine radio. When I lost a cribbage game I'd sit on wheel watch at night and listen to fishermen call home to see if the baby was walking yet or if their dad's diagnosis had come back. I followed their stories from night to night like the school secretary taped soap operas.

Clearly we were pre-cell phones or Tivo.

The smell was a mix of diesel, salt and cigarette smoke, coffee and Pilot Bread with peanut butter. The roar of Cummings engines wasn't even heard anymore. The Deutz generator just a hum in my ears. You only heard them when they weren't working properly. There was a stack of these new things called "CDs". Neil Diamond, Johnny Cash, The Ramones (that one was mine). I had a bootleg tape of a band I'd heard called Nirvana. No one else on the boat liked them but me.

The engineer on the boat had seven identical sets of clothing. I thought he just wore the same thing every day. He told me it was an act of "energy conservation" that he didn't have to decide what to wear. He took "safety naps". We sank targets with pistols off the stern of the boat when all our duties were done. He believed in four food groups – "*Steak, Potatoes, Miller (beer) and Pussy.*"

He shocked me a lot. Most things don't now.

The deckhand was young and had the energy of a squirrel who'd washed down an Adderall with a double espresso and a Red Bull back. The engineer offered to kill him on a regular basis.

I was on deck as much as possible. My eyes pushed out tears when they got so full of the beauty of the waking up world. When we crossed out of Canadian waters into Alaska, I stood on deck. Yes. That was it. Home. My Alaska.

Looking back through the glass of water, I see myself through time in the way I imagine my mother in the days before President Kennedy's assassination. Pure. Pulling in life and innocent to the blow to come.

The herring fishery in Sitka is like a derby-superbowl-landing on the moon for fishermen. It's fast and frantic and money is made fast and lost quicker. Airplanes accompany the fleet when they flood past the safe harbor walls to spot the thick harvest. The race so fierce planes crash into each other while looking for fish.

That year we waited more than a week to fish. Fish and Game kept testing the herring to see if they were ripe yet. "Standby to standby" became the joke. There's something about waiting for fish to get horny enough to spawn (and you have to catch them before they do that) which makes for a loaded atmosphere.

But did we catch them. Hundreds of thousands of tons. Prices high and spirits higher.

A redheaded fisherman named Rex boarded our boat in the Sitka harbor after midnight. He was undone. We thought he was drunk. When we realized he wasn't — we wished we all were.

The Exxon Valdez had "fetched up" and was spilling oil in our next herring fishing grounds.

The grassy knoll.

At the time I didn't know that the Raycus Radar hadn't been repaired and that was part of the off course problem. I also didn't know that the only emergency clean up crew had been laid off and the barge with all the clean up equipment was iced into dry dock in Valdez and had been sitting there for almost two years. None of us did.

We all crowded in the wheelhouse and listened to the marine radio.

They have to burn it now. They need to ignite it with a bomb – there are fighters sitting at Elmendorf. What is the hold up? Burn it already!

Then the weather forecast.

A North Eastern storm was blowing in.

“Jesus, it's going to blow it all the way to Kodiak...that's more than three hundred miles.”

A not so perfect storm.

The man that said that was a highliner – one of the top fishermen in the fleet for decades. He put his hands over his face and walked over to look out of the porthole.

He was right. Thirteen hundred miles of coastline was hit by the spill.

It took twenty years in court to get a settlement from Exxon. Did that feel like a win? Opening your mailbox to an Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Settlement check is like getting a royalty payment for the snuff film your kid brother was in. Hey, you're getting paid...but he's still dead...and you got to watch it.

Sorry, I jumped ahead of myself.

An Exxon hack showed up and told us we were lucky that it was his company that had messed up because they did business right and would make us whole.

I think he meant “hole” because we got screwed.

His name is Don Cornett. He stood in the Cordova high school and promised we'd be fine. Don sells real estate in Houston Texas and seems to be whole enough.



Bobby Van Brocklin was the mayor of Cordova. Four years later, on a Thursday, May 20th, 1993 he blew his brains out and left a note naming Exxon the reason.

“The stress from Exxon which brought about my financial stress, was too much to deal with alone. The end should be good and maybe my spirit will live. I have a lot of fear right now, but faith is all that is left. I wish I could have done more good for others but I guess my time is up.”

That is not “whole”. There’s a hole. A hole in a head. Because “whole” didn’t happen.

You see, being a fisherman isn’t what you do; it’s who you are. Having that taken away left shells of humans all over Alaska.

A few friends and I made a list of all the suicides that happened as a result of the spill. It didn’t happen for about four years. If the same percentage of people in the Gulf who are affected by the BP spill kill themselves as the Exxon Valdez – you’re looking at 45,000 dead bodies. We took it hard.

The average life expectancy of an Exxon Valdez cleanup worker? Fifty One.

Guys would come back to the boat complaining their urine smelled like diesel. No respirators. C-130s spraying the beaches...with what? Corexit.

Exxon still doesn’t have marked offices in Alaska. In 25 years, the State and Exxon have not reconciled. The Federal Government and the State of Alaska were complicit in the spill and the cover-up. Precautions, provisions, and preventative measures had all been made law. It seemed that wasn’t the issue...the problem was finding a government agency to enforce those laws. Exxon’s cost cutting measures insured a disaster; laid off spill responders; not fixing the disabled Raycas radar; the containment boom barge iced into dry-dock. All those profit enhancements were to be expected of a company that answered only to it’s shareholders. The government agencies that looked away from negligence and their responsibility have never been held accountable.

Our delegation to Washington DC could have introduced a law over the last 20 years to force Exxon to pick up their bar tab and pay for their crime. They were woefully silent. Instead, they debated things like gay marriage, vaginal rights, Bill

Clinton's impeachment over extra-presidential activities, steroids in baseball, and Terry Schiavo. Meanwhile, dozens of Alaskans, displaced from their identity, committed suicide while waiting for justice.

You know why? Oil rules. It's bigger than governments. For all the nut-jobs hoarding Mormon food and bullets talking about the "New World Order"? It's here. It's called Big Oil. It's why countries are invaded, wars are waged and media pretends it isn't happening.

When Sarah Palin was asked by Katie Couric what Supreme Court decisions other than Roe v Wade she disagreed with, she couldn't think of one. NOT ONE! She was a moose caught in the headlights. That didn't work out too well for the moose or the vehicle. The Alaska fisherman lost their voice once again. Thanks, but no thanks, Sarah. Her siding with Pebble Mine was enough...the icing on the cake was the wasted chance....a chance to tell America our story...an Alaskan story...thousands sick from clean up...tens of thousands bankrupt from a dead fishery. Sarah Palin is to Alaska what Velveeta is to cheese; sadly unsatisfying and empty of nutrition. She had the national stage to plead Alaska's case to citizens who had long forgotten the images of a once pristine Prince William Sound turned into a thick, black, rolling sea; the oiled sea otters and birds, unrecognizable seals and whales; an initially deformed and diseased herring run that became extinct-costing Cordova \$100 million a year. Exxon exploited Alaska and turned our pain into their profit.

After the BP spill I was hired by the BBC to go back to Prince William Sound to report on the shape it was in. There were no birds. We skiffed for hours to an outer beach, one pounded by waves for more than two decades. I walked across the salt marsh, shovel in hand. I didn't need a shovel. My boot prints had already filled with oil slick.

It was so close to the surface, and so was all my pain. The lies. The memories of dead birds, otters, seals, deer, bears, fish, and water. Dead Water. Dead Friends.

Alaska isn't a sovereign state any longer. Once we were the Last Frontier and independent. Hell, you have to drive through a foreign country for days to get here. Right?

We are oil colony. It wasn't that long ago that 10% of our legislature was indicted for taking bribes from oil companies.

A few weeks ago our governor appointed an oil man from California to serve on a board that accesses the tax burden for the Trans Alaska Pipeline. It's a big deal to the municipalities the pipeline runs through. When things got hot the appointee pulled his own name out of the running.

Three days before the 25th anniversary of the Exxon Valdez running aground, Governor Parnell has appointed an executive of said company from Houston, Texas to the board that decides the value of the pipeline for tax purposes. Mr. Richard Rabinow has worked for Exxon for 24 years, doesn't live here, but is sure to give Alaska the best bang for their buck.

Is the governor fresh out of “*#^@ YOU!” cards?

The state's willingness to do business with Exxon was like having your parents rent the basement to the guy who date raped you on prom night. Am I clear? The fact Governor Parnell wants to give them positions of power is like having said rapist adopt you. I suppose there should be no surprise. The governor was lobbyist and lawyer for big oil...I use the term “was” lightly.

Twenty Five years after the fact, Exxon has yet to pay Alaska the \$92 million owed for damages. They privatized their profits and socialized the risk.

Last time I went to Prince William Sound I met a deckhand. She was asking me about how many birds there used to be. I looked at her puzzled. She was born after the Spill. Alaska is divided generationally by epic disasters. Fifty years ago was the 1964 Earthquake – a 9.2 – the largest recorded for North America. Twenty five years ago a new defining moment for our state. For those of us who had our lives changed forever, we have to remember what we lost, and tell the next gen. We say things like “Never Again”, then see drilling in our Arctic permitted. In 1989 I had a Mac Plus computer – it weighed 15 pounds and had a screen the size of a greeting card. Now I have an iPad that works wonders. The technology for computers has changed, but not for oil spill clean up. Same diapers, booms and chemical sprays. The truth is, they don't clean up oil spills. They pay fines that have already been calculated in as the cost of doing business.

No. Exxon doesn't do business right. They don't make you whole. Exxon loves and takes care of Exxon, as does our governor. Who is going to love and take care of Alaska?



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Shannyn Moore can be heard weekdays from 6 to 9 p.m. on KOAN 1020 AM and 95.5 FM radio. Her weekly TV show can be seen Saturdays and Sundays at 3 p.m. statewide on ABC affiliates KYUR Anchorage, KATN Fairbanks and KJUD Juneau.

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