

Alaska: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow The Legacy of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill

The massive Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 showed Alaskans and the world the vulnerability of the extraordinary environment of Alaska. Studies in 2002 and 2003 reported that oil is still found on the beaches and in the waters of Prince William Sound, where the spill occurred. Some scientists argue that the oil will eventually dissipate, that the harm done by the spill was temporary, and that its effects will become less and less over time. On a tourist boat cruise through the Sound today, the oil and its effects are not very visible.

Other scientists argue that most of the wildlife species harmed by the spill have not recovered that subsistence resources like clams and crabs are still affected, and that even the toughest safety measures do not guarantee that there might not be another accident. In addition, not all legal action resulting from the suit has been fully settled. Yes, many Alaskans have put the spill behind them.

The challenge in a state as dependent on oil production as Alaska is how to support safety measures while at the same time supporting resource development. Bringing these two things into balance – protection of the environment and economic development – is perhaps the greatest task Alaskans face.

How does an understanding of how the Exxon Valdez spill happened help to judge what protective measures are appropriate in the future?