

Good as New, Almost

Kayaking the wake of the Exxon Valdez | By Susan Adams

"There's no doubt in my mind that the long-term environmental consequences of the Prince William Sound oil spill will far exceed those of Chernobyl or Bhopal. It's probably fair to say that in our lifetime we will never see the Sound the way it was on Mar. 23, 1989." —Jay Hair, president (1987–95), National Wildlife Federation

Wrong.

Gliding across Prince William Sound by kayak, you can't imagine that the 986-foot *Exxon Valdez* ever spewed a drop of crude oil, let alone 11 million gallons. Sea otters dive for oysters, doing



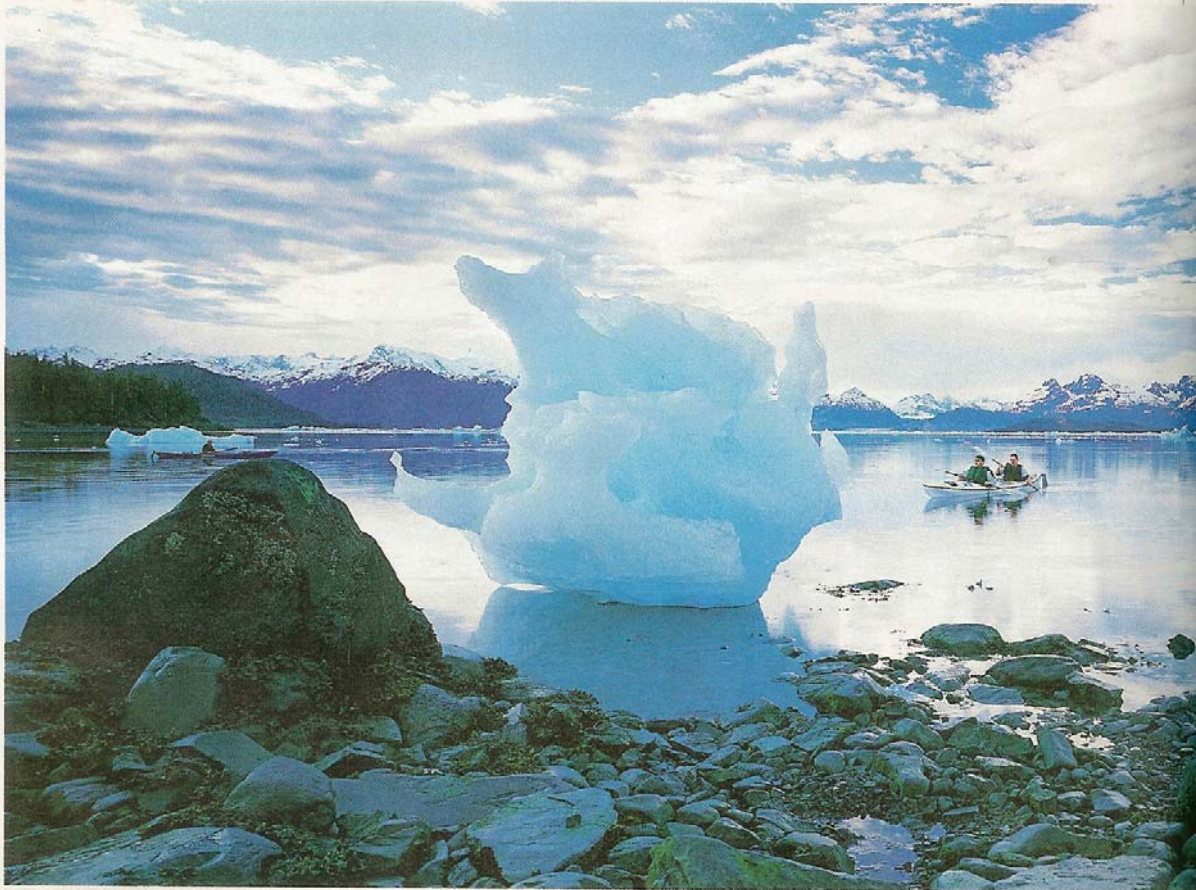
A pristine cove in Prince William Sound; beach cleanup (inset) after the 1989 spill.

backflips in the sunshine. Orca whales blow plumes of spray into the air. Porpoises skip and plunge in the wake of fishing craft laden with the day's salmon catch. Bhopal it's not.

There's not a trace of the gooey black stuff visible in the sound's 3,500 miles of

crenellated coastline. Waterfalls and fjords carve dramatic shapes along the shore, the Chugach mountain range stud- ding the horizon with snow-covered peaks. The terrain feels virginal, unsul- lied, overwhelming—nature on steroids.

From the sleepy oil town of Valdez, still the terminus for the Trans-Alaska pipeline and spigot for 17% of America's oil, two different outfitters give paddlers the chance to retrace the supertanker's path. Pangaea Adventures offers a day trip by boat (\$229, ten hours) ferrying 24 peo- ple and a dozen two-person kayaks from Valdez 30 miles to the stunning iceberg



fields of the Columbia Glacier, which is where the *Valdez's* troubles began. Calving ice from the glacier drove the tanker outside established shipping lanes.

Once we are in our kayaks, our guide, Timothy Duffy, leads us into a 10-mile-deep ice field dotted with blue-white bergs that vary in size from refrigerator to SUV to two-story house. For a while Duffy's presence is reassuring; but when we are already deep within the field, he warns us to hurry along: These behemoths, with only 15% of their bulk visible above water, are shifting constantly. At any moment one of them could split off a chunk more than big enough to capsize a kayak into the 45-degree water. We aren't wearing wet suits. Approaching a narrow passage between two bergs, he urges us on: "Okay, we're going to shoot the gap!"

The *Valdez* tried to avoid such bergs as it made its way between the glacier and craggy Bligh Reef. Captain Joseph Hazel-

wood had retired to his cabin after having knocked back vodkas (the number remains in dispute) at Valdez's Pipeline Club earlier that evening. His inexperienced third mate, whom he'd left in charge on the bridge, failed to execute a crucial turn in time, ramming the tanker onto the submerged rocks of the reef.

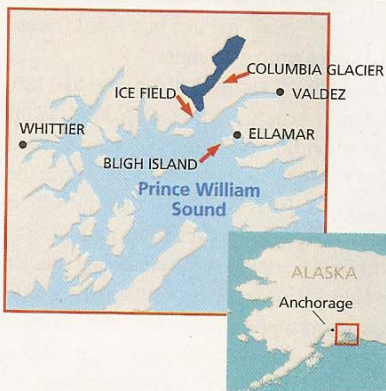
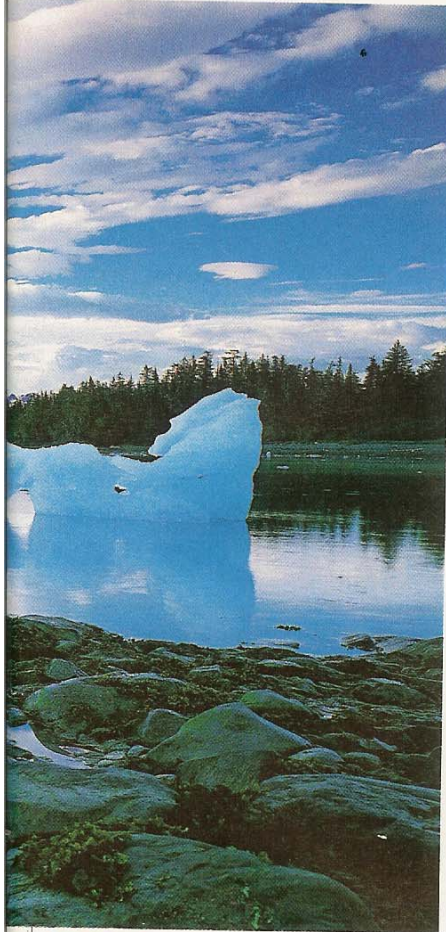
The spill exterminated a quarter-million seabirds and thousands of marine mammals. It spawned two decades of litigation. This June the U.S. Supreme Court slashed what had started as a \$5 billion punitive damage award against Exxon to \$507 million. Since the spill Exxon has paid out \$3.5 billion in penalties and cleanup costs. The mop-up, time and the environment's resilience have restored the sound to its former glory—superficially, at least.

Among the untouched spots: the town of Ellamar on Virgin Bay, less than 2 miles from Bligh Reef. First settled as an Indian

village, then used in the 1890s as a settlement for miners, Ellamar since 1992 has been home to the Prince William Sound Lodge, a refuge for adventurers who like a little luxury with their wilderness.

Hand-built from Sitka spruce by Christopher Saal, a former fisherman and commercial floatplane pilot, the quirky but gorgeous lodge attracts jet-setters. (Forbes 400 member Vinod Khosla visited with a party of 12 in 2003.) Saal, 54, moved to Alaska in 1974 and was here during the spill. "I flew over the tanker the day after," he recalls. "I thought, 'Everything I've worked for could be destroyed.'"

Saal, a plaintiff in the Exxon suit, says he stood to receive \$1 million before the U.S. Supreme Court slashed the award. Before the spill he had earned as much as \$40,000 a month harvesting herring roe, a delicacy in Japan, from kelp beds. Though the spill decimated that business, Exxon paid Saal \$4,000 a day during the cleanup



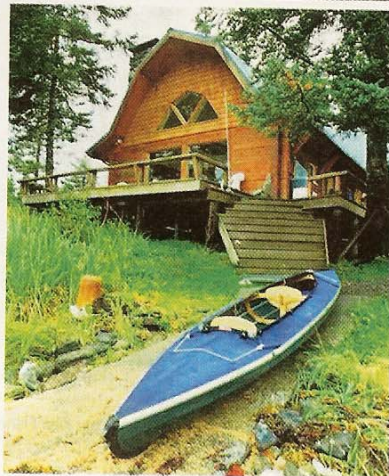
RICHARD HARRIS/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY IMAGES; RON NIERENBERG/ALASKA

to fly his floatplane around to pick up oiled birds. Today he gets \$325 a night for his lodge's comforts, which include meals he cooks using herbs and vegetables from his own garden. For an extra fee guests can go fishing from Saal's private launch or flightseeing from his Cessna 185.

Though the sound looks unsullied, various forms of subtle damage persist, according to the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill



Prince William Sound with all its bounty: icebergs and kayakers near the Columbia Glacier; bald eagle, otter, orca whale; Pangaea Adventures' water taxi disgorging glacier-bound paddlers and their accoutrements; the main house at Prince William Sound Lodge.



Trustee Council, a federal/state agency created with the \$900 million Exxon paid to settle criminal charges. Eleven species of mammals and sea creatures, says the council, have still not recovered, including the Pacific herring, which has returned only in small numbers. Though the otters look perky, many carry traces of oil in their livers. On several islands where the crude washed ashore, including Naked Island and Knight Island, a visitor even now can turn over a rock and find viscous black crud.

Those curious to relive the spill's details should get hold of the excellent, out-of-print book by Art Davidson, *In the Wake of the Exxon Valdez* (Sierra Club Books). An environmentalist who lives in Alaska, Davidson offers a clear-eyed description of the folly of much of the cleanup effort. Eager to save otters, the cute creature that caused so much public relations mayhem for the oil industry, Exxon poured \$20 million into an effort to rescue and wash the oil-soaked animals. But most died in transit or while penned at

cleaning centers. Davidson calculates that Exxon paid \$89,000 per saved otter.

What about the fish? Are they safe to eat? According to the oil spill council, fish do not metabolize oil the way mammals do. So the sound's bounty, including halibut, pollock and salmon, pose no danger. On a recent summer evening at the Harbor Café, a burger joint on Valdez's two-block-long waterfront strip, with outdoor tables offering spectacular views of snow-covered mountains, the special was a green salad topped with halibut pulled that day from the sound and grilled. The fish was excellent. The dressing: a little oily. **F**