ALASKAN OIL SPILL

Marine Center Is Lightning Rod In Dispute Over Restoration

A $47 million marine research and rehabilitation facility being built near Prince William Sound in south central Alaska is at the center of a debate about how to spend $900 million from Exxon to help the region recover from the 40 million liters of crude oil that gushed from the supertanker *Exxon Valdez* in 1989. On one side are scientists, who say that studying the region's marine mammal, sea bird, and fish genetics is the only way to obtain the data needed to protect and preserve the sound's ecosystem. Squaring off against them are fishing industry and environmental groups, which argue that the facility is an expensive scientific toy and that the money could be better spent protecting the region by acquiring land and making it off-limits to loggers and developers.

A 21 May ground-breaking ceremony for the Alaska SeaLife Center, in Seward, marked the culmination of years of planning for a scientific facility focusing on marine mammals that will also serve as an educational and tourist attraction. A pet project of former Alaska Governor Walter Hickel, it will stand adjacent to a smaller existing facility run by the University of Alaska. "The SeaLife Center will provide generations of Alaskans with basic knowledge about marine wildlife that will hopefully translate into better values about the marine resources in the state," says Robert Spies, chief scientist for the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council, which oversees the settlement fund and has allocated $25 million for the center. The center has also received $12 million from a pot of money created by Exxon's settlement of criminal charges; it hopes to raise the remaining $10 million from private donors.

But not everyone feels that the center, to be operated by the nonprofit Seward Association for the Advancement of Marine Science, is a suitable expenditure of oil spill dollars. "It sucked up so much money, and I don't think the research is going to be that beneficial," says Jerald McCune, president of United Fishermen of Alaska and the Cordova District Fishermen United, a group with an obvious interest in understanding why recent pink salmon and herring runs have been so meager. Environmental organizations say they're not opposed to science, but they don't think the center, which opponents have dubbed the "whale jail" because of its plans to rehabilitate injured marine mammals, is an appropriate use of state funds. "I am not saying that the center won't do some good; it's just that we think the Trustee Council can be doing more to restore the sound right now," says Pamela Brodie of the Sierra Club, who represents seven national and regional environmental groups on the Trustee Council's advisory panel.

At the heart of the debate is the definition of restoration, the principle behind the 1991 settlement. Although both sides agree that it isn't possible to directly repair damage to animals and habitat from the spill, they differ on the corrective steps that should be taken to ensure that the region can survive future assaults.

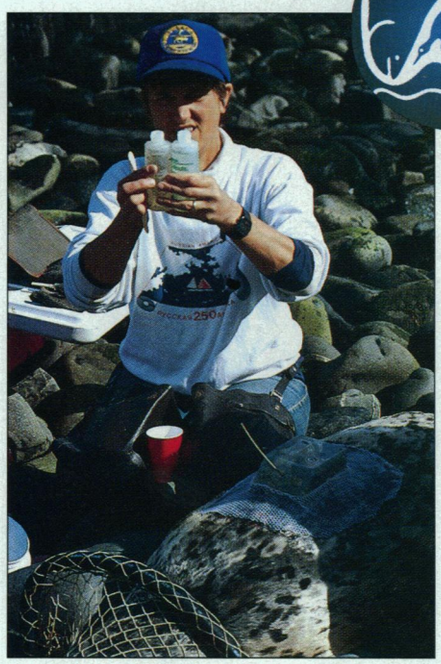

PHOTO: L. LOWRY LOGO: ALASKA SEALIFE CENTER

Tagging along. State biologist Kathy Frost prepares recorder to monitor seals in Prince William Sound, complementing work to be done at the Alaska SeaLife Center.

Those in favor of more research argue that it's an essential first step toward restoring the ecosystem. "The only way we can tell if a species is recovering is to know what keeps it alive," says University of Alaska marine scientist Michael Castellini, a member of the SeaLife Center's science advisory board. "This facility will allow us to get down to basic marine biology questions."

But Rick Steiner, a marine advisory agent for the University of Alaska, doesn't place such a premium on additional research. "The whole thing has turned into this pathetic feeding frenzy for scientists," he says. "We don't have to put a radio transmitter or a tag on every animal in Prince William Sound before we can say for sure that oil, water, and wildlife don't mix."

That view is shared by some oil company officials, who not long ago were arguing with environmentalists about the right way to restore the sound. For example, June Siva, ARCO's environmental manager, believes the priority should be restoring the injured resources. "If you can't do [restoration] with the money you have, maybe the damage assessment was too high," she says.

The Trustee Council, in allocating the $900 million that Exxon will pay through 2001, has tried to strike a balance between funding research that increases knowledge of the region and preventing further habitat damage through land acquisition. On the scientific side, the council has already spent $110 million on research, monitoring, and restoration activities, and $177 million to reimburse agencies for studies to assess the damage from the spill and for litigation.

In the next 6 years the council expects to spend an additional $107 million to $137 million on research, and last year it established a $108 million "restoration reserve" to be devoted largely to scientific studies. "The restoration reserve is essentially a way to hedge our bets," explains Stan Senner, Trustee Council science coordinator.

During the same period, the council estimates it will pay about $300 million for land to preserve habitat. Another $50 million has already been spent to acquire land to protect it from logging. But those amounts are too small to satisfy Steiner and his citizens group, the Coastal Coalition, which went to court to demand a more equitable share. However, last month a federal district judge in Anchorage, Alaska, rejected the coalition's request for a study by the National Academy of Sciences of the council's spending practices that would include a definition of appropriate restoration practices. The judge said the idea was worthwhile but that the council was not obligated to do it. The council says the research it funds is already reviewed by scientists and that another study is unnecessary.

With construction under way on the center, Alaskan scientists hope that it won't be too long before they can contribute hard data to the debate. But they agree that their efforts should not be isolated from the pressing environmental problems facing the region. "If we have a spill again and we haven't put any money into research, we will be back where we started from, with no baseline data," says Castellini. "But if we do only research and no land acquisition, wildlife may be worse off than they are now."

–Lisa Busch

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