

State Officials Slow Research On the Effects of the Spill

Three years after the *Exxon Valdez* spilled 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound, the pristine beauty of that wilderness area is returning. So is there any point in continuing research on the region's ecosystem? That's a controversial question in Alaska at the moment. On one side are government officials, who recently announced that relatively little of the \$90 million that Exxon is required to pay the state this year will be spent on collecting new data on animal populations that may have been harmed by the spill. That decision baffles some scientists, who think continued monitoring is needed to assess the damage and learn how to respond to future spills. "I really believe that some day there will be another oil spill and we won't be any better equipped to deal with it," says University of Alaska marine biologist Stephen Jewett, whose study on the subtidal area of the sound (the area just below the lowest low-tide line) was cut from the restoration plan this year.

The settlement between Exxon, the state of Alaska, and the federal government makes it clear that the \$900 million that Exxon must fork over by the year 2000 is to be used for restoration, including "all phases of injury assessment." The Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustees Council—the six federal and state officials who decide how that money is to be spent—have taken a conservative approach to research this year. First, they propose spending only \$67 million of this year's \$90 million, holding the rest until the public can be involved in discussions of what's needed. Of the portion that is to be spent, \$54 million will go for reimbursing state and federal agencies involved in the cleanup and only \$13 million for restoration projects—and much of that will go for analyzing data already collected or closing out research projects.

Under that framework, the only new data to be collected this year is for species that have shown injury and could be helped immediately or those that involve some other compelling interest—such as commercial benefit. For example, a harlequin duck study got Exxon dollars because results could lead to habitat protection, while a study of another waterbird, the Murre, had its funding sharply reduced because the study wouldn't have any immediate effect on the Murre population. Also deep-sixed was research on brown bears, sea otters and river otters, black oystercatchers (a type of waterbird), killer whales, boat surveys meant to estimate the populations of various species of birds and mammals, as well as Jewett's research on plants and animals just below the



Distinctly crabby. Stephen Jewett's research on the subtidal area of Prince William Sound has been cut from this year's restoration plan.

low-tide line. Several studies of the commercially crucial pink salmon population, however, will continue to receive funding.

The scientists who advise the council believe this is the best strategy for the restoration program now. Alaska chief scientist Robert Spies says, "We should not take any new field samples this year unless they are absolutely necessary. We need to analyze what we have to really understand what we've done so far—and then come up with a monitoring plan." Spies thinks new data will be valuable, but doesn't think all species need to be monitored every year; some, he says, could be monitored every second or third year. National Marine Fisheries Service Habitat program manager Stanley Rice thinks ecological research is valuable but agrees with Spies' go-slow approach. "Our laboratory was pressed into action with no staff, no funding, in an emergency effort the day the spill happened, and we have never caught up. This would be a good time to do up our results."

But some researchers argue that the idea of taking time off to decide what monitoring ought to be done in the future is unrealistic. Craig Matkin, who studies killer whales in the sound, is convinced the spill affected at least one resident pod of whales, but he says it will require continuous, long-term study to prove that hypothesis. "Killer whales are the type of creatures that if you don't study them

from year to year, then you don't get a clear picture of their population dynamics."

Terry Bowyer, a University of Alaska wildlife ecologist who has been leading a study of river otters, argues that monitoring teams can't take a year off, then resume. In this year's plan, Bowyer's study was given only close-out funds. When that happened, he says, the expert team that had taken him months to assemble "saw the writing on the wall...[and] decided to go our separate ways." After the funding plan was announced, some additional money intended for research on mussel beds in rivers was given for the study of the river otters. (The two subjects are related because the otters feed on the mussels.) But though some members of Bowyer's team will participate in that work, Bowyer insists his study is finished. "As far as I am concerned," he says, "this is it. I can't wait around. I'm hired to conduct research and I just can't sit on my hands and not do anything."

Lifting the wraps. The debate over the Exxon money is complicated by several factors. One is that Prince William Sound was largely unstudied by biologists, so investigators have little in the way of baseline data about animal populations. What's more, some of the data that do exist—not baseline data, but damage-assessment studies commissioned in the wake of the spill—have until recently been under wraps at the behest of state officials because of ongoing litigation. Indeed, one reason the council decided not to spend the full \$90 million was that the public has not yet been able to read the results of the damage-assessment studies and evaluate them.

State officials recently announced that the data could soon be made public. But the fact that until now much of the research has not been published has contributed to the frustration of Alaska scientists. Bowyer asks: "How can the public comment on how restoration money should be spent if it doesn't know what the damage-assessment data are?" Yet by the time the wraps were lifted, it was too late for the public to participate in decisions on this year's restoration funding plan. And that has created a nightmarish vision for Bowyer and others of crucial scientific data being lost this year because studies weren't funded. But while Bowyer and his colleagues have that nightmare, some members of the council have precisely the opposite nightmare—too much useless data. Says Alaska Attorney General Charles Cole, a council member: "I don't want to spend \$20 million on studies that will just gather dust in the University of Alaska basement." Things could change, but for the moment the council is apparently more concerned about Cole's nightmare than about the bad dream of Bowyer and his scientific colleagues.

—Lisa Busch

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