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Children of the Spills - Phase I: Alaska and the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill

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## ***Children of the Spills – Phase I: Alaska and the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill***

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### **Abstract**

*Children of the Spills is an oral history project created to encourage people in "oiled communities" to share their childhood memories, stories, and artwork. This project strives to broaden public understanding of the damaging human effects of oil spills and to assist communities as they work to protect and support children growing up in post-disaster settings. Ultimately, this project explores the ways that dramatic changes to the surrounding environment shape young people and the places where they live. Children of the Spills was carried out in two phases. The first focused on collecting oral histories from adults in Alaska who were between the ages of 1-19 at the time of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill and were raised in communities affected by the disaster. The second engaged children and youth in the U.S. Gulf Coast states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama who were impacted by the 2010 BP/Deepwater Horizon oil spill. This first field report describes the Phase I work of the Children of the Spills project in Alaska, while a second field report summarizes Phase II activities carried out along the Gulf Coast.*

**Keywords:** children, youth, Exxon Valdez, disasters, oil spills, Alaska, oral history

## Introduction

*Children of the Spills* – Phase I is an independent project, led by Katie Gavenus, designed to gather and share the stories of adults affected by the environmental devastation caused by the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. Katie is an environmental educator, collaborative artist, and resident of Homer, Alaska. The daughter of a commercial fisherman and a lawyer, Katie was only two-and-a-half years old when the *Exxon Valdez* ran aground on Bligh Reef in 1989, spilling more than 10 million gallons of crude oil into the waters of Prince William Sound. The oil itself touched over 1,000 miles of coastline, and the effects spread even farther, forever changing communities and people's lives. Her early memories of the spill were few, but what she remembers most was the sense of doom among the adults in the community and her own feelings of helplessness as oil drifted down the coast and into nearby waters. One afternoon, her mother took her to the local middle school to donate a blanket to the rescued, oil-soaked sea otters that were being bathed in the swimming pool. Although it was not until she was an adult that she truly understood the gravity of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, it was this moment in her young life that helped Katie realize how empowering a child to share can reduce feelings of helplessness and inspire hope.

When the *Deepwater Horizon* began spilling oil into the Gulf of Mexico on April 20, 2010, Katie recognized that a new generation of children were being thrust into the challenge of growing up in a coastal place that was experiencing sudden changes in ecology, economy, and culture. As news stories blanketed the airwaves, there was an unmistakable lack of personal accounts from children and families most affected by the spill. Informed by her own memories, Katie decided to begin the *Children of the Spills* project in 2011 (<http://childrenofthespills.org/>). Over the next two years, she traveled from Alaska to the Gulf Coast to collect the stories of adults, children, and youth regarding their experiences in "oiled communities." This first field report tells the story of the work she completed for the project in Alaska. A subsequent field report describes her experiences in three Gulf Coast states (see the Phase II field report in this issue of *Children, Youth and Environments* by Gavenus, Tobin-Gurley and Peek (2013)).

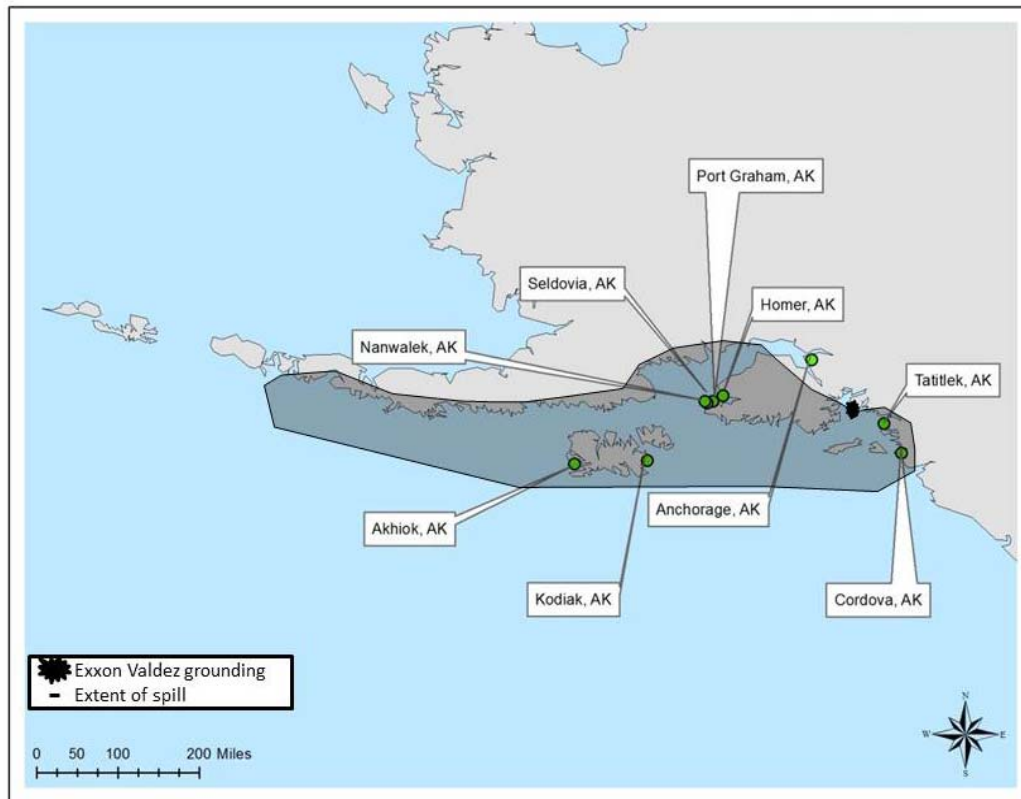
## Alaska

Phase I of this project began in early 2011. Cook InletKeeper provided monetary support and advice as Katie worked through the initial planning process for this phase. Katie subsequently applied for and received a grant from the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council to travel across coastal communities in Alaska in an effort to gather stories from as many people as possible. The Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies served as the fiscal sponsor for the project and lent Katie audio recording equipment for the collection of oral histories.

Over the course of ten months, Katie visited eight communities in Alaska in order to collect oral histories from men and women who were between the ages of 1 and 19 at the time of the *Exxon Valdez* spill (see Figure 1 for the locations of the communities where the participants were located). Each of the eight communities was impacted in some way by the oil spill. Oil actually reached the shores and beaches of all of the communities except for Anchorage. To a greater or lesser

extent depending on the place, the spill and its aftermath affected the subsistence resources, local economies, and community structure in each location that Katie visited. Locals were involved, both formally and informally, in many of the clean-up activities in their own and surrounding communities.

**Figure 1. Locations where *Exxon Valdez* oral histories were recorded**



Katie's first forays into the field involved trips to Cordova, Homer, and Kodiak. As an Alaska resident, she was able to identify potential participants through personal connections. She also visited libraries, coffee shops, and other local gathering spots to tell residents about her project and to recruit additional participants. Based on information she collected during these early interviews, Katie made a trip to Anchorage to interview adults who were affected by the spill and had eventually moved away from Kodiak. Her final field visits in Alaska involved trips to the smaller, more remote, villages of Tatitlek, Nanwalek, Port Graham, and Seldovia. In these locations, tradition dictates that outsiders must be granted permission from the Chief or other village or tribal organization before entering the communities. In addition, the fact that these communities are accessible only by boat or small plane necessitates coordination with the tribal council in each village (Figure 2). In these locations, Katie deferred to the recommendations of elders regarding how she should proceed with accessing participants. This resulted in interviews with elders from the Native Village of Port Graham and with adults who were children at the time of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill from Seldovia, the Native Village of Tatitlek, and the Native Village of Nanwalek.

**Figure 2. Katie traveled by car, ferry, and, in this case, small plane, to spend time in the communities affected by the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill**



Photo: Katie Gavenus

### **Project Goals**

The primary goals of the *Children of the Spills* project are to: 1) empower children, youth, and adults to share their experiences through interviews, conversations, and art; 2) raise awareness of the lasting effects of oil spills on young people; and 3) learn from people in affected communities in order to prepare for the immediate and longer-term impacts of present and future spills. More broadly, through the sharing of stories, *Children of the Spills* strives to illuminate the ways in which an oil spill can dramatically alter built, natural, and human environments.

By offering a space for people to talk about their experiences, this project brings attention to the detrimental impacts of oil spills in a unique and compelling format. Early in the project, a man in Cordova who was 10 years old at the time of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, affirmed the benefit of sharing his experience and learning from others:

*Everybody has a different story with the spill, but it's nice to hear people who have similar stories... a big component to my emotional suffering from [the spill] was kind of feeling a little bit alone.*

### Project Approach and Outcomes

During Phase I, Katie gathered stories and photographs from participants in Alaska with the expressed intent of sharing that information with children along the Gulf Coast (for more detail, see Phase II field report, this issue). In Alaska, Katie asked participants to recall their childhood memories in order to gain a better understanding of how the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill affected their lives, their families, their communities, and their livelihoods. She also asked the Alaska participants to reflect on their coping and healing processes as well as their suggestions to build resiliency and facilitate post-disaster recovery.

In each project location in Alaska, Katie scheduled interviews with individuals who grew up in communities affected by the 1989 oil spill. Katie began by explaining that she was asking them to participate in order to gather the untold stories of those who were children when the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill happened and to help children and youth living along the Gulf Coast learn from the experiences of Alaskans. This was an effective approach to recruiting participants, as many of the adults in Alaska revealed that they felt helpless as they watched the *Deepwater Horizon* rig contaminate the shores and upend lives along the Gulf Coast (Figure 3). Thus, in addition to opening up an outlet for Alaskans to share their own memories of the 1989 spill, it also provided them the opportunity to help children and youth presently experiencing a similar catastrophe.

**Figure 3.** While waiting to talk to a project participant, Katie met a group of young people mending nets on the dock. After she explained the project, they were willing to share their stories of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill while they worked.



Photo: Katie Gavenus

Again, the oral history contributors from Alaska ranged in age from 1 to 19 at the time of the 1989 oil spill. As most of the interviews took place 22 years after the

spill, the participants were between the ages of about 23 and 41 when Katie interviewed them about their experiences as children during the *Exxon Valdez* catastrophe.

The average interview lasted about 30 minutes. These interviews were audio or video recorded, or Katie took notes, depending on the participant's preference. In addition, participants were encouraged to submit any photos, journals, or drawings that were produced during the period following the *Exxon Valdez* spill (five participants were able to do so). Katie also took numerous photographs and some video footage of each willing participant. With the participants' permission, Katie posted the photos and videos on the project website, as described in greater detail below.

The fieldwork in Alaska resulted in 48 oral histories with participants who were children at the time of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill and 15 informal and formal interviews with elders and other community leaders. Katie also recorded numerous pages of observational field notes, collected photographs of the adults when they were children, and took current photographs of the participants as they worked on boats, mended fishing nets, and otherwise interacted in their environments. In addition, a teacher from Cordova donated a box of 100 drawings that were completed by school children in her class in the spring of 1989. The teacher asked her students at the time to draw an image of what to look for to know Prince William Sound was healing from the oil spill. In turn, the students drew a variety of pictures in crayon, marker, and pencil. This donation helped shape Phase II of the *Children of the Spills* project. Katie scanned the drawings and made a book of them to share with children in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. She then asked the children in the Gulf the same question to guide their own drawings of the Gulf Coast recovery process.

Katie used the stories and recommendations she gathered in Alaska to help educate and provide guidance to young people, their families, and communities along the Gulf of Mexico as they work to overcome the effects of the *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. For example, one of the key themes from the interviews with the Alaskans included the enduring legacy of the spill in the participants' memories. Even two decades after the *Exxon Valdez*, a participant from Cordova who was 9 years old at the time of the spill could still recall the first time he saw the devastation:

*I remember getting on a plane one time... Going to Anchorage, they actually went down and circled the spill site and we saw the lightering tankers pulling up to the Exxon Valdez. That was the first time that I saw with my own eyes what was going on. I just remember seeing the sheen for miles and miles and miles trailing down Valdez Arm and then spreading out.*

Another common theme from the Alaska interviews, which Katie also shared with the Gulf Coast participants, was related to the immediate and enduring effects of the spill on fishing and other subsistence activities. This obviously affected the participants as well as their family members, as described by another respondent who was 6 years old when the *Exxon Valdez* ran aground:

*My dad was actually in Homer when the oil spill happened. He had been doing a complete overhaul on his seine boat... A few days after the spill, he was coming back and... [he] had this nice, fancy paint job on his boat. [He] went through the oil and it made all the paint fall off.*

When asked what they wanted to share with the children and youth living along the Gulf Coast, many of the Alaska participants recommended that they do their best to “move on” from the damage and destruction, to the best of their capability. A male respondent from Alaska, who was 11 years old when the spill occurred, expressed this sentiment:

*I mean the biggest thing I think that we can take from what we learned here is move on. Get over it. If it's not something that you can continue to make a life out of there, then you need to leave. If you can, then you need to get over it and don't let yourself be put on hold for 20 years.*

The project ultimately inspired crucial conversations among adults in Alaska and along the Gulf Coast about how children and youth are affected by oil spills. As one father in the Native Village of Nanwalek expressed after listening to a *Children of the Spills* presentation that included quotes from other Alaskans, “I didn't know it [the spill] affected kids.” From the outset, the project was designed to initiate these kinds of insights and to engage community members in constructive conversations so that the healing process can move forward. Equally importantly, the Phase I project provided a platform for adults, who often felt silenced as children, to have their voices represented in the *Children of the Spills* archive.

To inform people beyond the communities directly affected, the stories were shared with a much wider public via the project website (<http://childrenofthespills.org/>). Visitors to the website can focus on specific individuals' stories and explore the video, photos, and writing associated with that individual. Visitors can also choose to browse through the stories of many individuals and learn about some of the common themes across regions and communities.

### **Lessons Learned**

Katie realized the benefit of being an “insider” when conducting interviews in Alaska over two decades after the spill. Her dirty Carhartt pants, sweatshirt, and rain boots were welcomed attire when she approached fishing families along the docks and in local shops (Figure 4). Being able to casually joke with participants about the dark humor following the spill and sharing her own personal experiences helped Alaskans open up about their childhood experiences following the spill. This allowed for the dynamic of the conversations to closely mirror a peer-to-peer interview and undoubtedly helped to establish rapport sooner in the interview process.



**Figure 4. Standard attire in Alaska, Katie's Xtra Tuff boots kept her dry and identified her as a "local," which was important in terms of accessing participants. Camping in her tent kept the project expenses low.**



Photo: Katie Gavenus

The first few interviews were easy. The individuals involved were eager to share their stories, had past experience with interviews because of all the media coverage that followed the spill, and were comfortable with the video camera. As Katie reached out to others throughout the communities, however, participants were sometimes less forthcoming and less at ease sharing about their lives. She realized at this point that relinquishing control of the research to the participants would be the most effective strategy. Katie began opening each interview by simply asking what the participant wanted to share about his or her experience following the spill. This shift in the approach to interviewing helped yield much richer narratives from the participants.

*Children of the Spills* was designed to allow a space for people affected by oil spills to tell their stories. For Katie, this meant that even if she had to interview someone on a loud boat where the recording would not be fully audible, it was perfectly okay (see Figure 5). On a few occasions, individuals were willing to tell their story but they requested that it not be recorded. Katie accepted this, recognizing the healing benefit of simply sharing memories, regardless of the medium. On some occasions, however, these individuals would decide, after talking for a while, that they were in fact comfortable with a more formal interview. At other times, participants veered far from the focus on the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. This was also welcomed and Katie was happy to document any stories participants wanted to share, whether the topic was climate change, cherished childhood memories, or favorite salmon recipes. The

emphasis was placed on the process of sharing and not on a clean final product that focused on a singular issue—the disaster.

**Figure 5. Many of the Alaskans who participated in interviews were busy with the fishing season. In this case, Katie and this salmon seine boat skipper talked about his childhood memories of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill while his crew refueled the boat.**



Photo: Katie Gavenus

Giving back to the affected communities and honoring what is important to the participants was a central goal of the project. Therefore, Katie plans to edit the video and audio recordings and the transcripts of the interviews and return them to the participants in a format that they can keep. She also strived to volunteer her time in the communities she visited to repay them for the personal stories they contributed to the project (Figure 6). For example, in addition to interviewing adults in Alaska, Katie met with middle school students from a Marine Stewardship Club in Kodiak to educate them about the lasting impacts of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. She discussed both the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill and *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spill with kindergarten through high school students in the Native Village of Tatitlek during her visit in the spring of 2012. She returned to Seldovia and the Native Village of Nanwalek to help deliver a curriculum about oil spill prevention and preparedness to elementary, middle, and high school students.

**Figure 6.** In addition to oral history work in Alaska, Katie also helped to teach young students about the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, its lingering effects, and the lessons learned in the aftermath of the spill. In this photo, Katie is shown sharing science and stories with students in the middle school Marine Stewardship Club in Kodiak.



Photo: Katie Gavenus

Although the *Children of the Spills* project officially ended in 2012, efforts are currently underway to continue the conversation between Alaska and Gulf Coast participants. This project spanned many months, but it will take years to fully understand the impact that the spills have had on children. Katie recently organized middle school students in Alaska and high school students in the Gulf Coast region to begin communication through Skype to discuss issues around climate change. She is also building an educational curriculum that pairs the science of oil spills with the social, cultural, and community impacts experienced by residents. This multidisciplinary curriculum could be taught in English, art, and science classes, and used in locations where connection to place is threatened, either by an oil spill or other harmful events. The goal is to develop educational resources that dispel the myths and unknowns and to help keep children and youth informed by facts and connected to others through personal communication and past experiences.

## Conclusion

The impacts of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill are quite varied and have been enduring in the lives of those who were residents of the communities affected by the disaster. For many people, one of the most devastating effects of the oil spill was the

curtailment of important subsistence activities. This problem was especially grave in places where subsistence is the cornerstone of both traditional culture and practical survival. In the Native Village of Port Graham, for example, one elder remembered the pain he felt when he took his young children to the beach after the oil spill. He had to tell them not to touch or eat some of their favorite foods, like bidarki chitons, clams, and mussels. He recalled the experience:

*You [could] see they really wanted the food down on the shoreline, they wanted that food, because they lived with it, they were raised with it... tell your little one, 'You are not to eat the candy that's there,' they get hurt... I told a lot of these kids here, I said, 'You want to live? Don't touch anything on the beach... they've got oil, and oil kills.'*

A number of people in Native Villages like Port Graham feel that the oil may have killed some of their subsistence traditions forever. These messages, along with many more, serve to remind people of the devastation and loss experienced by oil-affected communities. But, these stories can also serve as a beacon of hope when adults are able to share their knowledge of the efforts to overcome these losses and to identify actions that can be taken to protect coastal homes and livelihoods. In doing so, they attempt to empower children and youth to recover and become part of the solution in their own communities and in other disaster-affected places.

The adults in Alaska benefited from the opportunity to help others after environmental devastation occurred in their own communities. Following the *Exxon Valdez* disaster, parents often were too overcome by the crisis to discuss the spill with their children. Participants indicated that it was those rare occasions when the issues were discussed directly with them, that recovery began. Now, through *Children of the Spills*, Alaskans can share this knowledge with families along the Gulf Coast to expedite the recovery process and begin a dialogue that involves children and their very real and important role in the aftermath of an oil spill.

## References

**Gavenus, Katie, Jennifer Tobin-Gurley and Lori Peek** (2013). "*Children of the Spills – Phase II: The Gulf Coast and the BP/Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.*" *Children, Youth and Environments* 23(1):167-179.

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**Katie Aspen Gavenus** was a toddler at the time of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. She grew up in a family and community directly impacted by the spill, clean-up, and litigation. She graduated from Bowdoin College in 2009 with an environmental studies degree with a focus on marine ecology and a visual arts degree with a focus on photography and public, community-based art. In recent years, she has devoted her time to working as an environmental educator primarily with elementary students in Alaska, California, and Maine.

**Jennifer Tobin-Gurley** is a research assistant at the Center for Disaster and Risk Analysis and a Ph.D. student in Sociology at Colorado State University. She earned a B.A. in Sociology and Women's Studies in 2005 and a M.A. in Sociology in 2008. Her master's thesis research drew on qualitative interviews with local disaster recovery workers and single mothers who were displaced to Colorado after Hurricane Katrina. Her work has been published in the *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* and she received first-place in both the 2011 Hazards and Disasters Student Paper Competition and the 2011 U.S. Gender and Disaster Resilience Alliance Paper Competition. Jennifer is currently involved in a participatory project focusing on youths' recovery from the tornado in Joplin, Missouri.

**Lori Peek** is associate professor of Sociology and co-director of the Center for Disaster and Risk Analysis at Colorado State University. She also serves as associate chair for the Social Science Research Council Task Force on Hurricane Katrina and Rebuilding the Gulf Coast. Her work focuses on socially vulnerable populations—including children, women, racial and ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities—in disaster. She is author of *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11* (Temple University Press 2011) and co-editor of *Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora* (University of Texas Press 2012).

## Websites and Other Resources

Children of the Spills: <http://childrenofthespills.org>

Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council: <http://www.pwsrccac.org>

Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies: <http://www.akcoastalstudies.org/>

Cook InletKeeper: <http://inletkeeper.org/>