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Betrayal and Courage in the Wake of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill

HERE ARE PIECES OF THE Exxon Valdez STORY MOST PEOPLE ARE FAMILIAR WITH:

- Nineteen years ago, the *Exxon Valdez* grounded on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska, because the tanker never righted its course after taking a wrong turn to avoid ice.
- The accident resulted in the largest oil spill of U.S. history.
- The surrounding environment was devastated.
- The local fishing industry and the communities it supported were sent into permanent shock and loss.

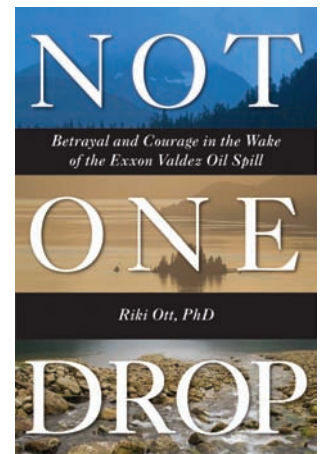
HERE ARE SOME OF THE LESSER KNOWN ELEMENTS OF THE STORY:

- Exxon estimated it spilled 11 million gallons of oil; independent scientists place it closer to 30 million.
- Exxon says they have cleaned up the spilled oil, yet visible contamination remains.
- The herring population that supports the fishery food chain in the region has never recovered.
- The community suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder after people lost their livelihoods, and the general state of desperation led to severe depression, broken marriages, and suicide.
- Exxon promised to make the community "whole again" but instead threw out thousands of claims from people who had lost their livelihoods and health due to the spill.
- Roughly 32,000 claims were heard by a jury that awarded spill victims a cumulative \$5 billion dollars (equal to one year of Exxon's average profits after the spill).
- Exxon appealed the \$5 billion dollar award, and a second jury cut that total in half.
- Exxon fought the award again, this time taking the appeal to the Supreme Court.
- The case remained unsettled for nearly two decades.
- Some 6,000 claimants have died since the case reached the Supreme Court, unable to offer their voice or story.
- In June of 2008, the Supreme Court slashed the award to just \$507 million.
- This settlement was a mere 10 percent of the original award. After deducting 20 years of legal expenses, many plaintiffs face bankruptcies, foreclosures, and other financial distresses, not including the negative environmental impact the community still endures.
- The community has become a case study for sociologists on how to help communities cope with and recover from disaster.

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"Fisherma'am" Riki Ott (holding a PhD in marine biology as well as a commercial fishing license) experienced firsthand the devastating effects of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill – and chose to do something about it. She retired from fishing, founded three nonprofit organizations to deal with lingering harm, and set out to write her first book about the spill, *Sound Truth and Corporate Myth*\$. With this second book she tells of what has happened in the past two decades to Cordova, Alaska, her hometown before, during, and after the spill.



the politics and practice of sustainable living

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BUT THAT IS NOT THE WORST OF IT:

- The largest injustice the Supreme Court had done for this case is to set a dangerous precedent by ruling to limit the size of punitive damages in maritime cases to no more than compensatory damages. In other words, the court set a cap of 1:1 punitive to compensatory damages.
- This act placed corporate interests above the interests of the people. It removes the people's ability to adequately fight a multinational corporation. Mega-corporations now know that there is no real financial consequence to acts of negligence that lead to disaster at sea.
- It is just a matter of time before this precedent in maritime law is extended to other fields of law, affecting everyone in America.

WHAT THE AUTHOR, RIKI OTT, IS DOING ABOUT IT:

- She has gone to Congress and urged them to overturn the Supreme Court Decision.
- She has embarked on an effort to pass the 28th amendment to the Constitution—essentially the separation of corporation and state.
- The 28th amendment would finally strip corporations of their legal status as "persons" under current U.S. law. This status was established over a long history of federal court cases in which lawyers defending large corporate interests argued that corporations should have the same legal protections as live human beings.
- Through her worldwide speeches and her new book, Riki Ott is telling the story of the people of Cordova, how Exxon's negligence turned their lives upside down, how they have recovered, and how they are still fighting the battle that involves us all, whether we are aware of it or not.

WHY DOES THE STORY OF CORDOVA, ALASKA, MATTER?

- A man-made or natural disaster could happen anywhere, to any community. People need to regain their rights to adequate protection from harm and acceptable compensation if damages occur.
- Sociologists expect more disasters with global climate change and warn that resulting class-action litigation only does more damage to the people and delays recovery—a lesson learned from the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

“As you read the following pages, allow your heart to break. Imagine Cordova as your home and Prince William Sound as your backyard. When you set the book down, make an absolute, iron-clad commitment to join other men and women who are determined to create a world that future generations will want to inhabit.”

-From the Foreword by John Perkins.

NOT ONE DROP
*Betrayal and Courage in the Wake of
the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill*
By Riki Ott
Foreword by: John Perkins

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