

EXXON VALDEZ OIL SPILL LESSON PLAN by Jerry Demmert

In March 1989, the Exxon Valdez oil tanker ran aground, causing 11 million gallons of crude oil to spill into Prince William Sound, adversely affecting 1,500 miles of Southcentral Alaska's coastline. There are many aspects to consider when grappling with the far-reaching consequences of the spill, then the largest in U.S. waters. For one, it devastated the sea life of the region, killing untold thousands of seabirds, otters, seals, and whales, as well as many coastal species that depended on those food resources for survival. Secondly, the economy Prince William Sound was disrupted, in many cases for years, as the livelihoods of fisherman, both commercial and sport, depended on the catch of salmon and herring. Furthermore, connection to the land and sea being an essential and integral part of Alaska Native identity, traditional subsistence fishing was impacted. Exxon spent \$2 billion cleaning up the Exxon Valdez spill, while nearly \$300 million was paid to residents of Prince William Sound. A jury ultimately awarded \$5 billion in punitive damages, but Exxon was able to successfully appeal for 14 years until the U.S. Supreme Court cut the dollar amount to \$500 million.

Nearly three decades after the spill, many scientific, environmental, socioeconomic, emotional, financial, legal, and political implications are left to consider.

Assessment:

In a class of 32 students, over the course of one week (five one-hour class periods), beginning on Monday, both the human and environmental toll of the Exxon Valdez oil spill will be examined.

At the beginning of the lesson, ask students to write a blog post about what they know about the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Assure the students that this is confidential and will not be shared with

anyone else. Their posts may be as short as one paragraph. At the conclusion of the exercise, students will be asked to revisit and revise their original post with what they have learned.

Activity:

Students will determine the monetary value to be paid to victims of the oil spill. This is a hypothetical exercise that deviates enough from an actual civil trial (no defendant and plaintiff attorneys), but it is an opportunity for students to examine the consequences of Exxon Valdez.

Process:

1. In a class of 32, twenty students will be divided into an even number of teams. These teams will represent interest groups harmed by the oil spill.
 1. Encourage the students to have fun with picking who their team will represent (even though it is a serious subject the class is considering). Teams may choose to represent groups such as:
 - a. people (commercial/sport fishermen)
 - b. organizations (tour companies),
 - c. marine mammals
 - d. other
 2. Each team is required to prepare arguments during the week for how much of \$5 billion their group should get. In this, they are learning about how the Exxon spill impacted whom they are representing, and putting a dollar value on it. During the hearing, each team will be given ten minutes to provide expert testimony, backing up their claims. Furthermore, it will be noted that only three of the five teams will be rewarded from the \$5 billion, so they should be prepared with clear

arguments as to why they deserve the money.

3. Students not representing interest groups will play the judges and the jury. Nine students will serve as the jury, doing their own research during the week on Exxon Valdez, ideally being informed jurists during the team testimonies. The jury will keep a record sheet, divided into two columns, taking note on the left side as to which team is most deserving, and on the right side, which team is least deserving. At the conclusion of the testimonies, the jury will have three minutes to write any questions they have for three-judge panel.
4. Three students will serve as the judges, each of whom, like those serving on the jury, will do their own research on Exxon Valdez, allowing them to have an understanding of the kinds of testimony they will hear from each of the five teams. During team testimonies, the judges will keep notes, and may ask questions themselves, as well as relating any questions from the jury.
5. The jury will then relocate to another room to consider among themselves how the \$5 billion should be divided. They will have 15 minutes to do this.
6. At the same time, the three-judge panel will go to another room to come up with their own conclusions as to which team should get the money, and how much.
7. Once the jury returns, a foreman (chosen from among themselves) will declare which three of the five teams will get a slice of the \$5 billion.
8. The three-judge panel listens to the jury foreman, but has set aside their own verdict, which they will share at the end.

The interest is in seeing if the judges and the jury agree.

During the week, all students will do their own research, and may even choose to contact, by email, phone, or in person, experts in the community who may provide insight into their case, which they can then use in testimony. This will be particularly helpful to the nine-member jury and the three-judge panel.

The teacher may raise several questions with the students at the beginning of the week as guidance, such as:

- Where does Exxon Valdez fit into the history of oil spills (e.g. Deepwater Horizon, 2010)?
- How has public opinion changed because of Exxon Valdez?
- As a devastating human-caused environmental disaster, how did the Exxon Valdez oil spill affect the mythology of Alaska as a pristine wilderness?
- Who cares about oil spills, anyway? There are whole ranges of issues here—from the reliance of industrial and commercial products upon petroleum to its environmental degradation.
- How did governmental, business, and environmental agencies respond to Exxon Valdez, and in what ways have oil spill response procedures evolved?
- How has the sea life and commercial fisheries of Prince William Sound rebounded in the years since Exxon Valdez, if at all?
- What was the response of Alaska Native people of Southcentral Alaska to Exxon Valdez?

Cultural Standards:

Ultimately, this exercise will lead students to discover the value of the environment and the people of a region who earn their livelihood from it. What is the value of oil to the economy of Alaska, and more broadly, on a global scale? In what ways

should we balance the need for petroleum-based recourses with protecting the environment of Alaska?

Cultural Standard for Educators: E.

<http://ankn.uaf.edu/publications/standards.html>

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