Lessons for the Gulf: The Legacy of the Exxon Valdez Spill, 20 Years Later

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More than two decades after the Exxon Valdez spill and clean-up in Alaska, globs of oil can still be found just under the surface of local beaches and coastal lands. Area residents warn those in the Gulf Coast to be prepared for a long recovery.

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BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor (Venice, Louisiana):
We're back tonight from Venice, Louisiana. And until this oil spill, the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska 21 years ago was the biggest in US history. That one was so devastating to the environment and to the fishing industry there, the fabric of life, there were actually huge increases in alcohol abuse, divorces, suicides and depression. Folks here are hoping that's not where they're headed. Our own George Lewis covered the Valdez spill back then. Tonight he's live for us from there tonight.

George, good evening.

GEORGE LEWIS reporting:
Folks around here have been telling us their lives have never been the same since the Valdez spill. And their advice to people in the gulf, be prepared for a long, rough ride.

Alaska's Prince William Sound is one of the most gorgeous spots in the United States, home to thousands of sea otters, black bears frolicking on the shore, and bald eagles soaring overhead. At first glance, it all looks fine. But R.J. Kopchak, one of the founders of the Prince William Sound Science Center, says don't be fooled by that.

Mr. R.J. KOPCHAK: Prince William Sound is, I guess, recovered if you look at a lot of robust species, but things aren't recovered.

LEWIS: After the Exxon Valdez ran aground, Exxon spent $3.8 billion on cleanup. But the crews only scratched the surface.

Back then I came to Night Island. This shoreline was covered with oil, dead birds and dead fish everywhere, the smell awful. Now it looks pretty good, but if you take a shovel and dig down just a little
bit, you can find rocks covered with flecks of oil still. And the smell? Kind of like roofing tar. Our guide this trip, Alaska bush pilot Terry Kennedy, who's flown scientific monitoring teams to the island.

Mr. TERRY KENNEDY: If you just let the water stand for even just a minute, then the oil blobs will start to show.

LEWIS: Still there 21 years after the spill. The fishing village of Cordova was hard hit. A mainstay of the local economy, the herring catch, disappeared. Kevin and Lindon O'Toole, whose fishing business barely survived, say they know the pain people in the gulf are suffering.

Mr. KEVIN O'TOOLE: I just remember what it was like for us, and it has to be like for all those people down there. It's wrenching.

LEWIS: People here say folks in the gulf should not expect the oil companies or the government to make them whole. Cordova Mayor Jim Kallander:

Mayor JIM KALLANDER: Maybe the take away from the whole thing is, don't count on anybody. Count on yourself.

LEWIS: A number of people from Cordova have gone down to fishing communities in the gulf to offer the benefit of their experience, and also to share the pain. Brian:

WILLIAMS: George Lewis on a return trip to Valdez, Alaska, 21 years later. George, thank you for that.