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Of Environments and Landscapes

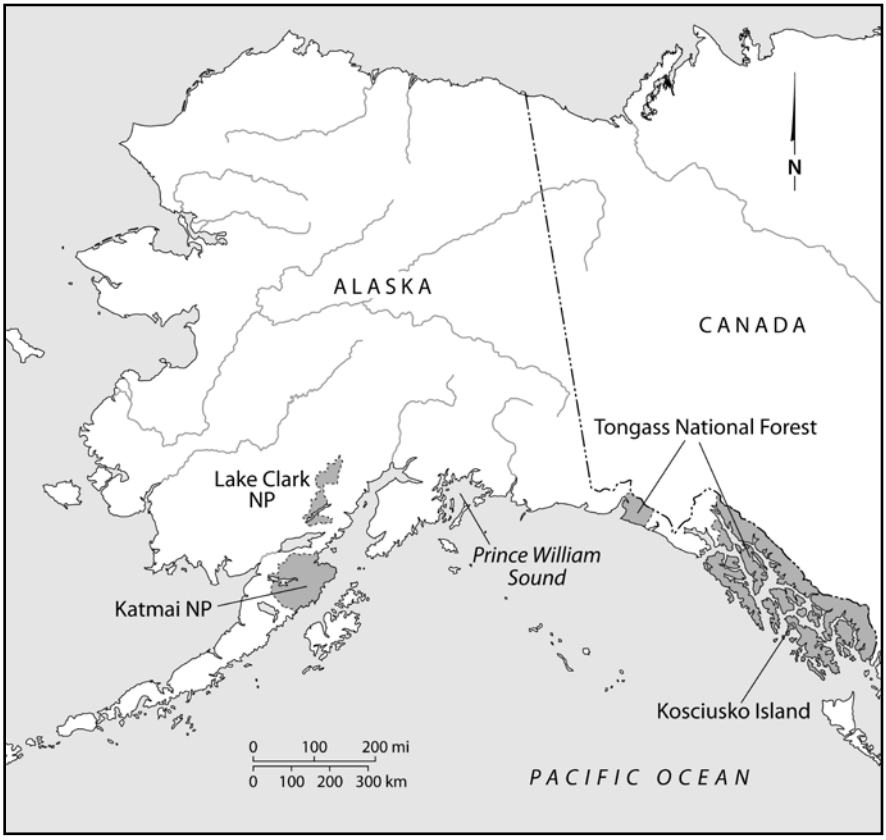
It would be hard to imagine a worse place for an oil spill.

Ecologist John Wiens describing the Exxon Valdez spill

Kosciusko Island, Southeast Alaska, August 2004

In the summer of 2004, I traveled to Kosciusko Island located off the shore of Prince of Wales Island in Alaska, in the traditional territories of the Heinya kwaan and Takjik'aan kwaan Tlingit people (see Map 2). I was invited to join the Kosciusko Island Rock Art Project, sponsored by Tongass National Forest and part of a newly envisioned Heritage Expedition—a way to undertake cultural resource fieldwork and draw on ecotourism support.[1] Tongass had been described to me as one of Alaska's wildest landscapes, and I was excited to have an opportunity to visit the region. On my flight to the island, my mood shifted from excitement to despair as I watched the thick canopy of temperate rain forest give way to vast timber clear-cuts and entire mountaintops denuded of trees.[2] Driving over Prince of Wales Island was equally disturbing: heavy rains had washed soils down slopes, and mile upon mile of slash piles and heavy undergrowth dominated most views. I could not help wondering how such seemingly destructive logging practices affected the health of these vital forest systems, the watershed and the soils, as well as the habitats of forest-dependent animals. When I shared my concerns with others on the trip, including a member of the Sealaska Heritage Institute, I was taken aback when she enthusiastically supported logging on the island.[3] From my naive perspective, I had mistakenly equated Native peoples' interests with conservation approaches.

My understanding of Tongass National Forest now encompasses a broader view, one that sees it as both a social and a contested landscape. The forest includes a complicated patchwork of federal, state, Native, and private lands. Stakeholders include land-management agencies, industry representatives, Alaska Native groups, scientists, locals, and environmental NGOs, each with a different approach to conservation, connections to place, and ideas of what



Map 2. Alaska with principal field sites, map by Bill Nelson.

constitutes environmental impacts. Natural resource policy expert Martin Nie (2006:386) has described Tongass as "perhaps the most controversial national forest in the country." Although stakeholders today have collaborated to assess climate-change vulnerability and define its social, ecological, and economic costs, at the time of our project, forest managers, private industry actors, and legislators were engaged in protracted debates over forest management initiatives and practices and timber quotas (see, e.g., Beier et al. 2009; Durbin 2005).[4] Yet, our project existed in isolation of these larger contexts.[5] But if you consider federal legislation passed in 2014 now provides seventy thousand acres of the forest to Sealaska to log, including a large area of Kosciusko Island, then the project takes on a different hue. Some have even charged Sealaska with circumventing environmental laws and regulations and masking unsustainable logging practices within terms of Indigenous rights to resources (Dombrowski 2002).

Whatever the case, it is important to position heritage landscapes within a wider frame. Viewing the project in this way would require understanding the histories of individuals, institutions, and agencies adapting to changes in the political, cultural, and economic landscape as well as how competing interests from industry, tourism, public land needs, and a regional boom-and-bust economy intersect.

Ignoring the forest politics comes at a cost. Over the course of my fieldwork in Kosciusko, I came to realize that our engagement with heritage landscapes (i.e., management, interpretation, conservation) requires more than an inventory, description, or analysis of its cultural or natural resources. It requires attending to the complicated (and often occluded) histories and contemporary frictions and tensions. If we know that forests (or landscapes) are "deeply cultural and political" (Braun 2002:8), then how do we position them within a wider frame, with an acute attentiveness to their sociopolitical entanglements and historical antecedents? This chapter explores this question, looking specifically at contexts related to heritage landscapes intersecting with human-caused disasters and climate-change/sustainability initiatives. Drawing from two research projects—the cultural landscapes of the central Gulf of Alaska and the Altai Mountains of Mongolia—I situate these sites within their broader sociopolitical contexts to show how heritage landscapes are central to and mediate contemporary debates on sustainable development, climate change, resource depletion, and disasters. As I argue here, how heritage landscapes are interpreted have consequences for how they are maintained and/or managed. Not locating the political contexts of our work has consequences.[6]

The "Human Spill": Prince William Sound, Alaska

Located in the north Gulf of Alaska, Prince William Sound includes an intricate system of bays, fjords, inlets, and islands (see Map 2.).[7] The Sound includes over two thousand miles of shoreline and provides a mosaic of freshwater, marine, and terrestrial habitats for fish, birds, shellfish, and terrestrial and marine mammals. Archaeological and oral historical evidence reflect at least four thousand years of use and complex interactions with cultures throughout the North Pacific Region (Crowell and Mann 1998; Reger 1998). By the late 1700s, Russian and English explorers, fur hunters, and missionaries made their way to the region, and by the late nineteenth century these explorers established mines, commercial fisheries, canneries, and timber mills (Wooley 1995). Despite the influx of industry and immigrants, Alaska Native groups have maintained a strong cultural and spiritual connection to the Sound.

The Sound is a dynamic landscape. In 1964, Prince William Sound was the epicenter for the Good Friday Earthquake, an extreme earthquake (magnitude 9.2)

that transformed the topography through uplift, landslides, and tsunamis. The region was also the epicenter for the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, which, until the *Deepwater Horizon* spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, was the largest oil spill in the United States. Due to a series of factors, including pilot error (alcohol and lack of sleep) and inexperience, the *Exxon Valdez* grounded on Bligh Reef and spilled nearly 11 million gallons of toxic crude oil. Disaster responders could not immediately contain the spill, and severe storms, high winds, and the North Pacific and Alaska currents distributed the crude oil to nearly thirteen hundred miles of shoreline (Hanable and Burkhart 1990). Hundreds of thousands of animals were killed and many, many more injured. The crude oil contaminated the "food chain beginning with plankton and continuing through the oiled carcasses of its victims" (Hanable and Burkhart 1990:9). Commercial fisheries and tourist industries closed and, communities struggled with the social, economic, and environmental impacts of the disaster, the legacies of which are still felt deeply today. Despite enormous efforts to assess the recovery of the Sound's ecosystems, the long-term impacts of this event are still debated (see, e.g., Mobley 1990; Wiens 2013).

The spill severely disrupted Alaska Native communities' subsistence economies and practices and caused a profound cultural loss (after Kirsch 2001). Communities struggled with the loss of marine and terrestrial plants and animal resources, and efforts to minister to the damage to traditional and sacred sites were often stymied by larger environmental cleanup efforts. The significance of these social, cultural, environmental, and psychological impacts were often overlooked and cleanup efforts often intensified disruptions (Gill 1997). It is beyond the scope of this discussion to expand on the damage and devastation of this catastrophic human-caused event. Instead, I focus here on the role of conservation specialists, heritage managers, and scientists in the post-spill recovery efforts.

The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill was not only an environmental disaster; it was also a cultural phenomenon, what Morrison (1993:432) aptly coined the "human spill."[8] The spill "became the most intensively studied oil spill in history" (Wiens 2013:xxii). Thousands of people—disaster responders, cleanup workers, academics, scientists, contractors, industry representatives, and media—came to assist in the cleanup effort. Directed by the U.S. Coast Guard in consultation with Exxon, state agencies, and contractors, these efforts included more than eleven thousand people and at least a thousand boats (Wiens 2013:13; see also O. R. Harrison 1991). Despite Alaska Natives' participation in the cleanup efforts, many found the intrusion of people as disruptive as the spill itself. Well-meaning responders, for example, unknowingly disturbed cultural sites and plants and animals. And what was not widely shared or known was that the spill occurred "at the peak of the preparation phase of their subsistence cycle" (Gill 1997:169). The Alaska Native

community members I have spoken with have repeatedly stated that subsistence harvesting, hunting, and sharing are essential to cultural continuity and are important traditions that unite their communities.

Although cultural resources were clearly a concern, the majority of the recovery, assessment, and monitoring projects focused on ecological and environmental impacts. These projects were part of the second wave of efforts that were funded through the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council, formed using funds from the $900 million civic settlement with the U.S. federal and Alaska governments.[9] The council supported restoration efforts, scientific studies, and research to record the legacies of the spill on ecosystems, water chemistry, shoreline ecology, fish and wildlife, animal and conservation rehabilitation, and, to a lesser extent, cultural resources (see, e.g., Wells et al. 1995; Wiens 2013).[10] Studies included analyses of the impacts of hydrocarbons in marine sediments, water quality on fish and crustaceans, and salmon and egg incubation and fry survival. Similarly, federal, state, and local agencies undertook research, some of which reported contradictory results (see Wiens 2013:xxii). Together these studies comprise more than twenty thousand documents, two thousand scientific reports, as well as books, technical reports, theses, dissertations, and conference presentations (see Johnson and Rustin 2013:xx).

It is important to recognize that agencies debated whether archaeological heritage was considered a resource within the scope of spill cleanup and governance. As archaeologist Doug Reger and his colleagues (2000:1) lamented, a "coordinated agency assessment did not begin until two years after the spill." In other words, cultural resources were not a top priority in recovery efforts. There were differing legal opinions and scopes of interest related to agencies' mandates as well as competing ideas of just exactly where cultural resources fit within cleanup activities. In the end, cultural resources were seen as falling under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, in part due to the efforts of the U.S. Coast Guard, which pushed to include impacts to archaeological sites within recovery and cleanup efforts. Nevertheless, impacts to cultural resources were a concern to many cultural resource managers and agencies, and the *Exxon Valdez* Cultural Resource Program was created to address damages to cultural resources, and to comply with federal and state laws.[11] An unprecedented number of archaeological surveys were conducted, and archaeologists inventoried cultural sites throughout the spill area (Mobley 1990). The program also supported longitudinal studies to monitor impacts and collect materials and sediment samples found in oiled sites, and included areas in Alaska Peninsula, Kodiak Archipelago, and the coastal regions of Outer Cook Inlet and the Kenai Peninsula (see, e.g., Jesperson and Griffin 1992; Mobley 1990; Reger et al. 2000:1).