

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS OF HARBOR SEALS IN THE AREA IMPACTED BY THE EXXON VALDEZ OIL SPILL IN PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND, ALASKA
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On 24 March 1989 the tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground in Alaska on Bligh Reef, spilling about 10 million gallons of Prudhoe Bay crude oil. Harbor seals (Phoca vitulina richardsi) were one of the species impacted as oil spread through parts of Prince William Sound and the adjacent Gulf of Alaska. Many seals contacted oil while swimming in and through the resulting slicks. Oil washed ashore at some seal haulouts and coated the rocks and algae, resulting in further oiling of seals. Harbor seal haulouts were identified as priority areas for cleanup and several were treated to varying degrees prior to the beginning of pupping in mid-May. Nonetheless many of the pups born in heavily oiled areas became coated with oil shortly after birth. Some seals were still coated with oil 4 months after the spill. A 3-year research program will evaluate the impacts of the oil spill on harbor seals, primarily through aerial surveys during the pupping and molting periods, and toxicological and histopathological examination of tissues from fetuses, pups, and adults found dead, and animals collected for scientific purposes.

Abstracts



Andrea McCann

8th Biennial
Conference
on the
Biology of
Marine
Mammals

Pacific Grove
California
December 7-11, 1989