

KODIAK ISLAND

30 YEARS AFTER THE
EXXON VALDEZ OIL SPILL

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Photos Courtesy of Author

An American Crusade for Wildlife by James B. Trefethen notes that Interior Secretary John W. Noble and fellow B&C member George B. Grinnell succeeded in urging President Benjamin Harrison to create the Afognak Forest and Fish Culture Reserve by executive order in 1892.

American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation by John F. Reiger deems Afognak to be the first federal wildlife refuge and the first federal “wilderness area.”

This historic land withdrawal in the Alaska Territory for forests, salmon, marine mammals and birds remained intact until 1908 when President Theodore Roosevelt added Afognak to the Chugach National Forest that TR and Gifford Pinchot created a year earlier.

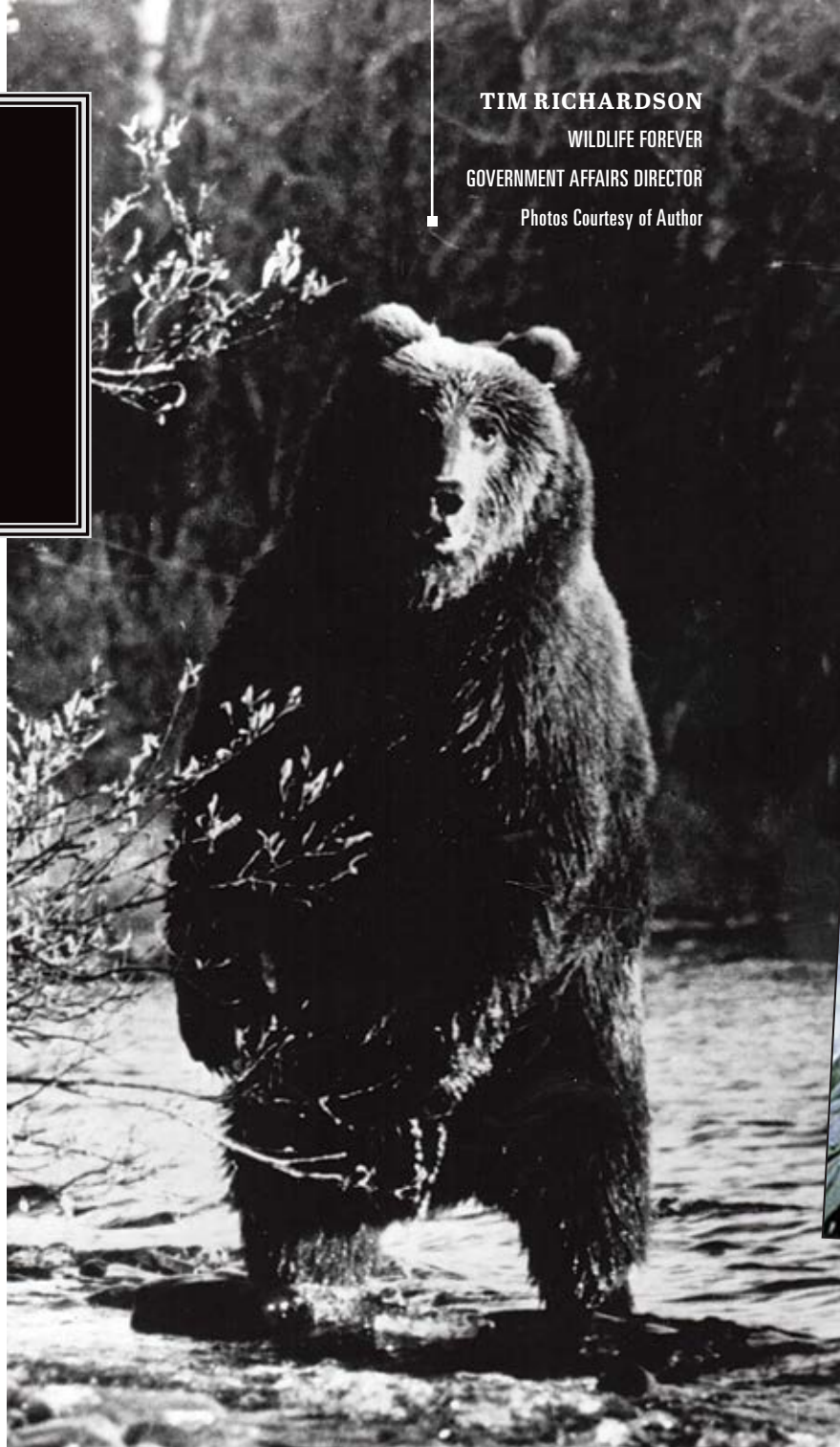
However, in 1971 and 1980 private Native corporations gained fee title to 90% of Afognak due to valid aboriginal land claims by “civilized tribes” in the 1867 Treaty of Cession with Russia in the Alaska purchase.

Within the conveyance of Afognak lands to Native corporations, Congress reserved 50,000 acres to add the Red Peak Unit to the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge—the last refuge to have been created by executive order in 1941. In addition, public access was retained on roughly half of all Native owned land on Afognak.

These interwoven threads of conservation history and public and private land rights came into sharp relief after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound thirty years ago and some of the 11 million gallons of oil from the stricken tanker rode Gulf of Alaska currents to Afognak’s shores.

When biologists ranked Afognak Island habitats highest for fish and wildlife species and human services injured by the spill, Akhiok Kaguyak, Inc. and Old Harbor Native Corp. agreed to halt coastal rainforest harvesting at Seal Bay for \$28.5 million from the \$1 billion Exxon settlement.

It was no coincidence that the Boone and Crockett Club forcefully advocated the return of some of this Cradle of American Conservation to protected status, or that Afognak and Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge ended up receiving the largest restoration investments from the Exxon Valdez oil spill.





The area of the oil spill (August 10, 1989) compared to the Eastern Seaboard.



1993 - FIVE YEARS LATER

Excerpt from Fair Chase, Spring 1994

Five years after the Exxon Valdez's killing tide flowed into one of the world's richest marine ecosystems the recovery process continues to be assessed by federal and state biologists and others. In order to assess the recovery of the ecosystem a number of "indicator species" have been identified. These include birds, sea mammals, fish and intertidal organisms such as mussel and eel grass. Following is a sampling of these assessments to date.

BIRDS:

Experts believe bird mortalities due to the Exxon Valdez oil spill may have totaled half a million, affecting 90 species of birds and ducks. Insulating feathers soaked up the oil, compromising the animals' ability to survive. As even small amounts of oil accumulated, matted feathers allowed cold water to soak through to the skin, heat was lost, and the birds succumbed to hypothermia. Normal preening and grooming behavior often resulted in the ingestion of toxic doses of oil, sometimes resulting in death or lowered metabolisms, and negatively affecting breeding behavior, reproductive success and egg shell thickness. Marbled Murrelet and Harlequin ducks are still species of serious concern five years later, while bald eagles are recovering.

MARINE MAMMALS:

Sea otters were at risk from exposure to oil for some of the same reasons as birds: oil on sea otter fur disrupts its ability to insulate and aid in buoyancy, and normal fur grooming behavior resulted in the ingestion of oil. The immediate sea otter death toll was probably about 4,500. Within Prince William Sound, up to 30 percent of the otter population was killed. Pup survival of the first winter after the spill was poor. Sea otter populations are recovering their full range. Seals fared better than sea otters because of their reliance on blubber, instead of fur, for insulation. One killer whale pod experienced unprecedented 20 percent mortality in the year of the spill and the following year, losing seven whales and six whales, respectively. This killer whale group is recovering and is expected to reach pre-spill population levels by the year 2000. Humpback whales showed no impact from the spill.

FISH:

Pink and sockeye salmon, herring, and Dolly Varden and cutthroat trout were all adversely affected by the oil spill and have received attention from the Exxon Valdez Trustee Council restoration. In the autumn of 1989, pink salmon egg mortality in oiled streams averaged about 15 percent compared to about nine percent in unoiled streams. Since 1989, egg mortality has generally increased. In 1991 and 1992, approximately 40-50 percent of the salmon eggs in oiled streams did not survive, as compared to an 18-30 percent mortality in unoiled streams. In 1993, though the rates of egg mortality had dropped to an average of less than 25 percent in oiled streams and less than 15 percent in unoiled streams, the differences still persisted. Herring fishermen were shocked to find last year's fish covered with viral infection in Prince William Sound.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL & SUBSISTENCE RESOURCES:

In addition to damaging fish and wildlife populations and the commercial fishing industry, the Exxon Valdez oil spill severely impacted many forms of subsistence harvesting by Alaska Native villages from Chenega and the Kenai Peninsula villages such as Port Graham and Seldovia, all the way to the fishing village of Chignik, 800 miles from Valdez on the Alaska Peninsula. This region of Alaska, including the Kodiak Archipelago, was among the most heavily populated areas in prehistoric times. Dozens of ancient village and ceremonial sites were damaged by oil, erosion from spill clean-up efforts, and vandalism. Subsistence is a crucial factor in making rural Alaskan life possible. Many Alaska Native villagers rely upon wild sources for at least a pound of food per day.





VICTORY ON KODIAK

Excerpt from Fair Chase, Summer 1995

Score a big one for the Boone and Crockett Club's conservation agenda! Last May, Interior Secretary, Bruce Babbitt, signed agreements with the presidents of two Alaska Native corporations to protect more than 150,000 acres of prime habitat for

brown bear, salmon, bald eagles and other species on Kodiak Island. The historic land transactions were a combination of fee acquisitions and conservation easements protecting habitat important to fish and wildlife species injured by the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

The \$60.5 million package used funds from the \$1 billion 1991 settlement between the federal government, State of Alaska and the Exxon Corporation. Lands acquired from Akhiok Kaguyak, Inc. and Old Harbor Native Corporation were deeded to them by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and now are returned to the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge.

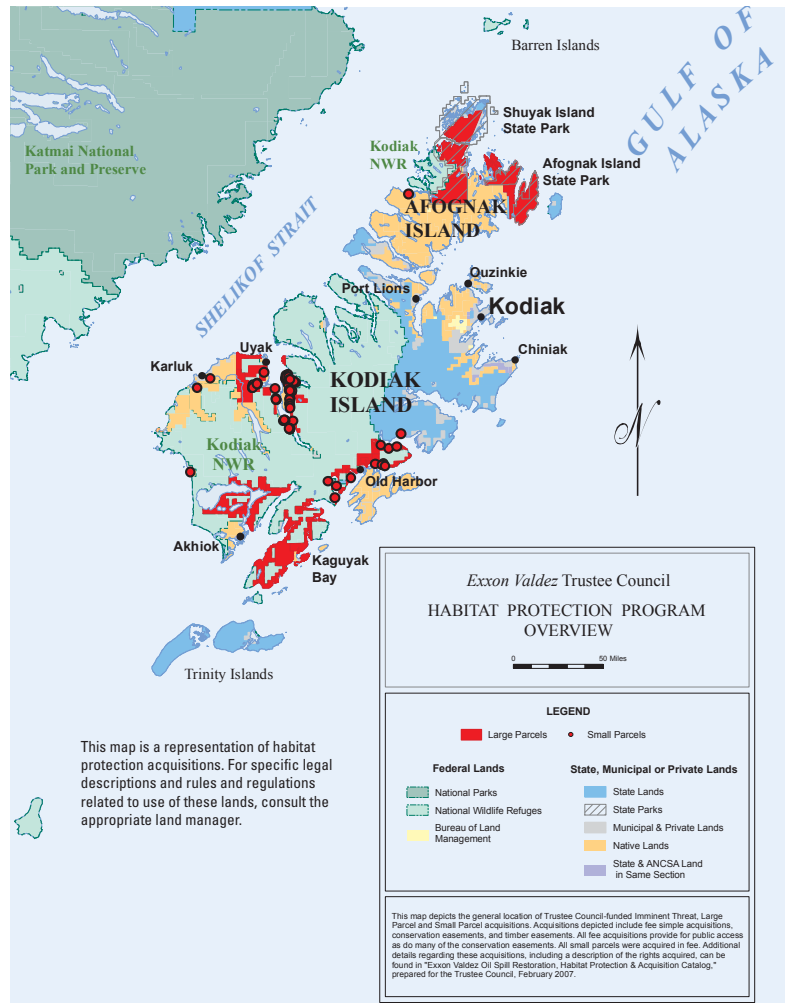
"These agreements will preserve important habitat, provide additional opportunities for hunting, subsistence, commercial and sport fishing, and other outdoor activities, and strengthen the local economy on Kodiak Island," Secretary Babbitt told an audience of Native Alaskans, sportsmen and environmental groups present at the ceremony in his office. "President Franklin Roosevelt established Kodiak National Refuge a half-century ago at the urging of hunters and conservationists, the Eisenhower Administration enlarged it in the 1950s, and now, in keeping with President Clinton's commitment to protect the environment and provide economic opportunities for Native peoples, we are taking another step in preserving this natural treasure."

The two Native Alaskan village corporations retain some land around their village to allow for subsistence hunting and fishing, to preserve traditions, and for economic development. A third Kodiak agreement with Koniag, Inc. is being finalized at press time and will protect an additional 58,000 acres.



The Karluk is one of the most storied rivers in all of Alaska. The highest known brown bear densities in the world occur in the Karluk drainage including Karluk Lake. The river typically produces one third of the commercial harvest of salmon from the Kodiak refuge. The mainstem Karluk River is 21 miles long and drains an area of 236 square miles. It provides spawning or rearing habitat for all five species of Pacific salmon, rainbow/steelhead trout, and Dolly Varden/Arctic char.

The Karluk River is one of two drainage systems in the refuge (and one of the few such drainages within the boundaries of an Alaskan national wildlife refuge) where both steelhead and chinook salmon populations occur in abundance. Average annual escapement of all five species of Pacific salmon combined have reached or exceeded 2.5 million fish during the even years and nearly a half million in odd year returns.





Kodiak's rough weather and island status keep it off Alaska's beaten paths. Remote lodges (above left) and the solitary angler in the Shelikof Strait (above right) are the norm.

Oil came from the salt water (left in the distance) and impacted rich estuaries that are fed by fresh water streams. Salmon were directly and indirectly injured by the oil spill, therefore marine, coastal, estuarine and riverine salmon habitats were prioritized for restoration purchases in order to "replace equivalent resources" injured by the spill.

Also sport fishing, wilderness values and sport and subsistence hunting were ecosystem and human use assets that could attract restoration dollars. President Harrison's B&C inspired Afognak reserve included marine mammal haulouts (right) as well as rainforests and salmon.

The public accesses rivers by raft and tent camps. Afognak became the site of Alaska's first forest carbon project. Former Alaska U.S. Regional Forester Denny Bschor (bottom right) helped lead the effort.





Discovery of "the Kodiak grounds" led to the Golden Age of the American whale fishery according to whaling historian Alexander Starbuck. High plankton concentrations in Kodiak's near shore waters feed abundant whales, fish, birds and marine mammals.

B&C skull measurements led to Kodiak bears being classified a sub-species *Ursus Arctos Middendorfi*. Isolated on Kodiak after the retreat of Pleistocene glaciers, Kodiaks never co-mingled with mainland grizzlies *Ursus Arctos Horribilus*.

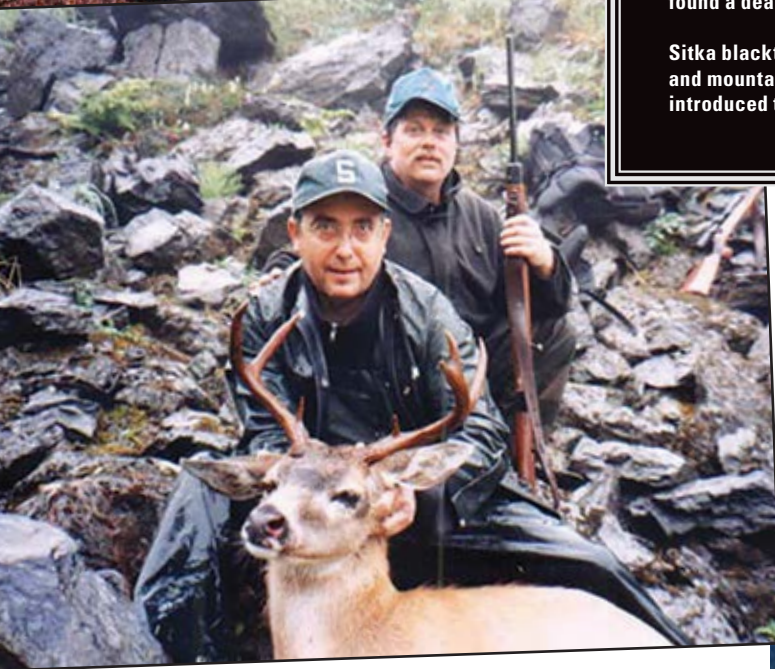
Michael V. DeSantis (left) took this Alaska brown bear, scoring 26-5/16 points, on Kodiak Island in 2010.

Intact habitat and selective hunting of large boars mean that the highest density of Kodiak bears may exist now. The largest bear that ever roamed Kodiak could be alive today. At right, 41 bears found a dead whale at Russian Harbor.

Sitka blacktail deer, Roosevelt's elk and mountain goats were successfully introduced to the Kodiak Archipelago.



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All of Afognak was originally in the Benjamin Harrison territorial withdrawal Boone and Crockett requested. It was later added to the Chugach National Forest created in 1907 under President Roosevelt, then through two acts, in 1971 and 1980, most of the island was deeded to Native Corps. Red Peak is in the background of this photo below, which along with 50,000 acres became the Red Peak Unit of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge. The timber below 1,000 feet went to Native Corp. and B&C successfully urged the Exxon Valdez trustee council to buy it and they did. It is part of the largest conservation purchase in the spill region.



Tim Richardson, above with a Sitka blacktail deer, was the former consultant to Kodiak area Native landowners who reached out to the Boone and Crockett Club for advocacy support as Exxon Valdez restoration began during the Clinton Administration.