

## The “entrepreneurial spirit:” *Exxon Valdez* and nature tourism development in Seward, Alaska

### Abstract

After the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, residents of Seward, Alaska turned in increasing numbers to nature tourism. Once a shipping, logging, and fishing town, the community is now known for a range of nature tourism businesses designed to allow access to nearby Kenai Fjords National Park and Chugach National Forest. While the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill devastated the coastline in many parts of Prince William Sound, oil spill cleanup activities in Seward during the summer of 1989 accelerated two developments critical for the tourism industry in Seward. The cleanup efforts allowed for the evolution and expansion of Seward residents’ “entrepreneurial spirit,” prompting them to turn increasingly towards nature tourism activities to bolster the community economy. Yet the growth of the “entrepreneurial spirit” in Seward also relied on a changing understanding of ‘nature’ and the environment, a process that was also catalyzed by the oil spill cleanup efforts. Using ethnographic methods, including semi-structured interviews with local residents and participant observation, I explore how residents perceive the shift towards nature tourism in their community economy, and the ambivalent long-term consequences of the spill for community life.

### Keywords

Entrepreneur, Alaska, Oil, Nature Tourism, *Exxon Valdez*, Geography

### Introduction

A week after the *Exxon Valdez* ran aground, releasing over 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound, oil began to approach the mouth of Resurrection Bay, the narrow fjord on which the 2,000-person community of Seward is located. Seward became one of the many centers of cleanup operations along the Alaskan coastline, and oil spill recovery efforts helped the community overcome an economic slump dating back to the decimation of Seward’s port economy during the 1964 earthquake (Barry, 1995). Entrepreneurs used profits from the cleanup to grow Seward’s incipient nature tourism industry.

In this paper, I argue that the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill cleanup during the summer of 1989 accelerated the development of nature tourism in Seward. The paper’s objective is to connect how Seward residents framed nature tourism growth as an example of their “entrepreneurial spirit,” with the communities’ changing imaginaries of nature and the environment, and show how both processes were catalyzed by the oil spill and subsequent cleanup efforts. showcasing individual drive and opportunism. Yet the growth of the “entrepreneurial spirit” in Seward also

~~relied on a changing understanding of 'nature' and the environment, a process that was also catalyzed by the oil spill cleanup efforts.~~ "Entrepreneurs" refers to individuals who established business ventures, following Foucault's (2008) description of people who become defined by their enterprise capacity, and their drive, ambition and opportunism as they act within capitalist structures. "Nature tourism" specifically refers to travel inspired by the natural attractions of an area, such as the wildlife or scenery.

Analyzing tourism and its relationship to oil disasters builds on previous work by Widener (2009) on the connection between oil disasters and tourism growth. By providing an analysis of Seward's *long-term* response to the oil disaster, this paper complements studies of disaster tourism that detail the short term responses of existing tourist destinations to natural disasters (Faulkner and Vikulov, 2001); the expansion of local tourism industries as a response to disasters (Widener, 2009); or the management of potential disasters within the tourism industry (Nyaupanea and Chhetrib, 2009).

By examining the relationship between entrepreneurial attitudes, tourism development, and changing understandings of 'nature,' this paper also engages with 'nature' as a developing aspect of tourism studies. While scholarship focused on the geographical implications of nature tourism or ecotourism has grown, Nepal (2009) argues that geographers have tended to focus on spatial, behavioral, or reflexive types of analyses. Geographers have neglected, as Reis and Shelton (2011) write, to investigate the different meanings attached to 'nature' and its construction in different parts of the world. Rather than interpret 'nature' as simply the place in which nature tourism takes place (Reis and Shelton, 2011), therefore, this paper explores how nature is constructed and situated in time and place. Nature becomes, as Cooke (2012) writes, a taken-for-granted way of concealing a "complex of power relations," and this paper ~~responds~~ acts on ~~to~~ the demand by Cooke (2012) and others to bring that "complex" into focus.

Secondly, by situating the development of Seward's tourist industry within the complicated web of global capitalism that connects oil spills and entrepreneurs, this paper responds to the call by Bianchi (2009) for a critical turn in tourism studies that underscores the relationship between tourism and capital accumulation as historicized and multiscalar. In the discussion below, the ambivalent consequences of nature tourism for Seward suggest that the aftermath of disasters for tourism communities varies widely depending on the geography, political context, and economic activity of the affected community. The fluctuations in the local Seward economy, as ~~is + detail~~ detailed below, together with the oil development and conservation efforts at the national scale, help to shape the particular version of 'nature' Seward residents promoted. As Kollin (2001, p. 8-9) writes, situating tourism studies within multiscalar networks is especially significant for studies of Alaska, as its wild places have been produced as a commodity central to American imaginaries of wilderness and pioneering national identity for over a century.

The paper proceeds by situating the summer of 1989 within a longer history of attempts to promote tourism in Seward. I then explain the methods used to conduct this analysis, including semi-structured, retrospective interviews as well as participant observation. Next, I turn to two sections of data which together explore my argument about the role of the oil spill in accelerating tourist development in Seward. During the summer of 1989, oil spill cleanup efforts led to an evolution and expansion of residents' "entrepreneurial spirit" related to tourism. This change was only possible because of changing imaginaries of nature. Finally, I conclude with discussion about the implications of the use of the "entrepreneurial" framework and some of the ambivalent consequences of nature tourism for Seward's future.

### **Background: Chronicling the expansion of tourism in Seward**

Seward today is a nature tourism destination. TripAdvisor rated the community its number one tourist attraction for the entire United States in 2010, noting that, "this historic and picturesque town is the gateway to Kenai Fjords National Park, rich with wildlife, spectacular fjords and tidewater glaciers" (TripAdvisor, 2010). Contemporary tourism in Seward focuses on providing access to outdoor recreation areas such as Chugach National Forest and Kenai Fjords National Park (see Figure 1.) (Amsden et al., 2011). Nature tourism in Seward has its roots in Seward's early history, as well as growing marketing efforts and business development during the 1980s.

[Insert Figure 1. Map of Seward and surroundings]

Tourism promoters quickly recognized the economic draw of travelers visiting southern Alaska ninety years before the oil spill; geographer Henry Gannett, for example, noted that the value of Alaska's scenery "measured by direct returns in money received from tourists, will be enormous" (quoted in Nash, 1981, 8). Visitors, drawn by the first national protected areas in Alaska, such as Tongass and Chugach national forests, as well as the attraction of the Native population, began stopping in Seward after the completion of the Alaska Railway in 1923, which was made possible through an unprecedented federal subsidy. As the northernmost ice-free port, Seward became the gateway to Alaska for many visitors. Yet continued reliance on the shipping industry proved impossible, as an earthquake measuring 8.4 on the Richter scale destroyed the waterfront on March 27, 1964, and the port—and accompanying jobs—never returned (Barry, 1995).

While Seward struggled to rebuild after the earthquake, Alaskan resources catapulted to the top of the national agenda with the 1968 discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay. The immediacy and scale of the potential profits from the North Slope oilfields encouraged the federal government to both appease the growing environmental movement as well as settle long-standing native land rights claims in order to quickly access the oil deposits. By the late 1960s, the growth of the environmental movement nationwide had prompted interest in Alaskan lands, and Alaska's "last wilderness" became a focal point for wilderness advocates across the

nation who hoped to prevent development (Nelson, 2004). Development boosters opposed conservation plans, charging that protected lands would operate with “total disregard of the interests of the people of Alaska” (Nelson, 2004, 129).

Alaska’s conservation and development potential set the stage for the federal government to begin negotiations with Alaska Native groups for development rights. The U.S. had never signed treaties with indigenous groups in Alaska, but the potential for oil development gave Native groups powerful leverage (Haycox, 2002). Before the discovery of oil, and building on a growing Native rights movement, the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) had combined contested land claims under one umbrella lawsuit. They proposed a new form of ownership status for native lands that would use the structure of an economic development corporation, which the state quickly accepted so they could begin drilling for oil. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) passed in 1971 (Haycox, 2002).

Meanwhile, the election of President Reagan in 1980 prompted a quick resolution to the conservation issue as well. Outgoing President Carter signed the Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980, designating over one hundred million acres of new protected areas in Alaska. One of the ten new national parks created under ANILCA was Kenai Fjords National Park (KFNP), occupying 567,000 acres of land along the coastline south of Seward, including the 286 square mile Harding Ice Field (Barry, 1995). Local officials had begun marketing the community as a tourist destination beginning in the late 1970s, and while KFNP added an additional draw, significant visitor increase occurred instead when Alaska signed an agreement with cruise ship companies in 1984. Cruise ships coordinated with national parks, lodgers, and outfitters to make package programs for tourists, and numbers of tourists increased from just over 100,000 cruise passengers in Alaska in 1984 to over 1.96 million in 2012-2013 (Alaska, 2008; McDowell Group, 2014). The rise in nature tourism in Seward can be situated within worldwide growth in the cruise industry, which beginning in the 1990s entered a period of “high growth” at rates over double those of the tourism industry as a whole (Brida and S, 2010). The popularity of the cruise industry helped drive the increase in tourism to Alaska during the 1990s, a period where seasonal tourism grew even as the overall Alaska economy stagnated (Brooks and Haynes, 2001).

## **Methods**

I use qualitative, ethnographic methods to explore residents’ understandings of tourism development, imaginaries of nature, and community change. Ethnographic methods have the potential for underuse within tourism research because they are time consuming and limit quantitative analysis (Cervený, 2008), however, a combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, triangulated with historical research conducted at the library of the University of Alaska- Anchorage, allowed for a nuanced understanding of residents’ perceptions of community transformation.

I conducted 42 semi-structured interviews with residents of Seward, Alaska in the summer of 2008. Interviews were recorded and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. They focused on a variety of topics, including significant areas of community change, the relationship of the community with the national park, the growth of tourism, and the rationale for living in or moving to the community. Initially, the 1989 oil spill was *not* the subject of interview questions, but after interviewees repeatedly stressed its importance for community economic development, I introduced the spill as a final topic for interviews. Interviewees included a cross-section of the community: long-term and short-term residents, representing a mixture of occupations, including community leaders, business owners, federal employees, and students. Interviewees were close to evenly split in terms of gender (20 female; 22 male) and length of time lived in Seward (23 greater than ten years; 19 less than ten years). Table 1 describes interviewees' types of community engagement, including professional or voluntary affiliations.

Table 1. Interviewee community engagement

National Park/ related agency	8
Nature tourism (tour/ attractions operator, accommodations)	8
Fishing	2
Community leadership (Chamber of Commerce, mayor, tribal leadership)	5
Community resources (local historians, journalists, scholars)	4
Other	15

I identified interviewees through participant observation, research into the Seward community, and the snowball method where one interviewee leads to the next contact. In order to limit bias within sampling, I entered into community networks through multiple starting points, including the national park staff (often transient); community and tribal leadership (often long-term residents); neighbors (often younger and shorter-term residents); and personal connections (which varied considerably). Snowball sampling runs the risk of limiting interview reach to particular groups of people within a community, and provides neither a representative sample of the entire population nor a unifying character for selection. The use of a relatively small sample of community members (my interviews represent ~1.5% of Seward's population) also prohibits quantitative analysis such as exploring the variation of perspectives by positionality or demographic characteristics.

On the other hand, snowball sampling allows a research unfamiliar with a community to use the social networks of community members to break down barriers to participation; allows access to potentially marginalized populations; and allows for exploration of issues of interest outside of the original project proposal, such as the oil spill response. Semi-structured interviews provide consistency by focusing on similar topics across a variety of conversations

yet allow for interviewees to highlight important themes. While retrospective interviews focusing on key moments in community history may not produce the accurate dates and order of events, they elucidate how residents remember the past, and what moments become measures of community change. All interviews are recorded using pseudonyms, and Institutional Review Board permission for the study required identifying characteristics to be erased from documents intended for publication. Because of the requirements surrounding confidentiality of interview respondents, data throughout this paper is labeled using pseudonyms (e.g. “Clark” or “Harris”) with as much description as possible (e.g. “long-time resident” or “national park employee”) that allows confidentiality to be maintained.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, analysis draws from participant observation, an ethnographic method that elucidates how social processes occur in particular places. Participant observation in Seward over eight weeks allowed me to observe the rhythms of community life (such as at city council meetings, public lectures, cruise ship or fishing docks, restaurants, tourist boats, neighborhood parks, grocery stores, and historical sites), fluctuations in tourism from day to day, and underscored the historically and geographically contingent spaces that mediated the development of the tourism economy and its acceleration after 1989. Interviews and participant observation, documented through fieldnotes, were compared and triangulated with information from library research, which included a focus on local and regional history books, local historical documents such as tourism promotional materials and guides, newspaper articles, and memoirs of local residents.

### **Results, Part I: Framing cleanup activities through the “entrepreneurial spirit”**

The environmental impacts of the spill at the mouth of the bay were immediate and profound. One member of the national park staff recalled, “I remember we would see these big fields of oil, this thick mousse floating around on the water... There was a lot of death in that thick blanket of oil” (Clark interview 2008). Yet at the end of the bay in Seward, many people interviewed recalled the economic impacts of the oil spill cleanup efforts more than the environmental devastation. In this section, I describe the cleanup efforts, employing excerpts from semi-structured interviews to explore the economic effects of the oil spill cleanup in Seward, and explore they became characterized by residents as representative of the community’s ‘entrepreneurial spirit.’

Initially, the federal government declared Exxon responsible for the costs of the cleanup. In total, Exxon is often cited to have spent approximately \$2.1 billion dollars for the spill response between the time of the spill and the initial civil settlement on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1992 (Chambers, 2003). The criminal settlement fined Exxon \$150 million (\$125 of which was forgiven for its participation in cleanup efforts). Exxon paid an additional \$100 million to the federal and Alaskan state governments as restitution for environmental damages. The civil suit brought against Exxon was settled for \$900 million, which was paid off in 2001 (Holba, 2014).

Exxon's decision to route some of the spill's cleanup operations out of Seward produced a surge of jobs, money, and activity, as another resident described:

So there were a lot of new people in town, there was a lot of money. It really became this kind of boom town on steroids of – all those same people that came in, and again, a fair number of young, wild, unsavory types went out and would make a whole bunch of money and then they'd end up back in town kind of like the fishing fleet– the bars were full, drug use was up, fights, you know, it was just this wild west crazy town (King interview 2008).

While the Exxon Corporation paid the bills, it relied on federal employees to provide much of the leadership and oversight for cleanup efforts. Members of the National Park Service managed the cleanup operations in Seward, passing the costs along to Exxon, together with a host of other federal agencies, several state agencies, city and local authorities, and commercial fishermen familiar with the area. A member of national park staff recalled that, "We couldn't spend any money on this, it was not federalized. Exxon had to do it...We sent Exxon a [bill] later for some \$7 million for Kenai Fjords and... it was nothing to Exxon. What did they care about \$7 million?" (Clark interview 2008). Park Service employees collected data, sampled the shorelines, surveyed coastal environments, and managed the relationship between the cleanup operation and the media (Clark interview 2008).

While National Park staff members were responsible for overseeing cleanup operations, Exxon contracted the majority of the labor of the cleanup to temporary workers managed by the VECO Corporation of Anchorage, who hired boat crewmen, laborers, and other employees (Holba, 2014). One Seward fisherman ([quoted in Zemach, 2014](#)) who sat out the spill cleanup remembered that VECO was quickly overwhelmed: "Exxon, through VECO, was just throwing a lot of money and resources at a problem that was much bigger than they could deal with" ([Zemach, 2014](#)). Seward began competing with other cleanup centers along the coast, such as Valdez and Cordova, for funding and federal attention, and federal employees were praised for their cost-effective and efficient work, as this encounter with Senator Ted Stevens illustrates.

Senator Stevens came by a few days later, he'd just been to Valdez, went to Cordova, and it was pandemonium. And he came to Seward and we had this team, and he went to one of our briefing meetings... and we had this organization – "Okay, everybody, let's go," and we went off. And Stevens is like "Wow." He says, "Whatever you guys are doing, just keep doing it." And he says, "Compared to Valdez and Cordova, this is wonderful." He says, "Don't let the bureaucrats stop you." Well, we were the bureaucrats. But it's hilarious. But he – it was a compliment (Clark interview 2008).

This interaction between Senator Stevens and the federal employees suggests how local actors began to view themselves increasingly through an entrepreneurial lens, their ambition and self-discipline contrasting with the "bureaucrats" Stevens criticized. Foucault (2008: 252)

suggests that framing activities as ‘entrepreneurial’ refers to a shift in how people imagine their political subjectivity. They become *differently governable* as enterprise subjects, comprehended or disciplined through their enterprise capacity alone. In Seward, many people described the economic activities during and after the oil spill using similar neoliberal frameworks that privileged self-starters exhibiting individual drive, creating business opportunities for financial gain. As one nature tourism business owner explained, “Our resources sort of got capitalized on as far as our natural beauty and our sport fishing... You’re just kind of bringing more of an entrepreneurial spirit” (Miller interview 2008). While no official statistics are available regarding the makeup of the entrepreneurs who took advantage of the cleanup efforts, anecdotally they represented a cross-section of the community, long-term residents who bought charter fishing boats and newer people who guided kayak tours, creating small, owner-operated businesses based on accessing natural attractions, such as scenery and wildlife.

Indeed, competition against the threat of the oil helped to shape the rationale of work during the spill, an understanding that many people took on as their own. For example, one national park employee remembered that federal, state, and local employees, Exxon funding, and the community became united through adopting similar goals: “We could help the city of Seward to kind of protect its image” (Clark interview 2008). Indeed, the community became so enmeshed with cleanup efforts that by November of 1989, the Seward General Hospital had taken out a \$200,000 loan from VECO in order to stem cash-flow problems resulting from an overflow of spill-related patients at the hospital (Rosier, 2012).

The potential of the spill for economic gain was hard to miss. Exxon funding secured the loyalty of local workers, who in the rush to fill well-paying cleanup jobs, left many businesses in town stranded without workers to pump gas or bag groceries (Martinez interview 2008). A long-time resident recalled, “The way Exxon threw money at this. I mean, you’d see fleets of automobiles, new automobiles coming into town” (Martinez interview 2008). The amounts of money that were generated in a short period of time have become folk legends, such as:

The oil company came down, spent \$100,000. In one day, they bought every pickup. There used to be a car lot out here. They bought every pickup. They went down like at Brown & Hawkins [general store] and bought all of the raingear with cash (Allen interview 2008).

For the residents who found jobs as well as the businesses who sold supplies to the cleanup operation, the spill represented a “short little economic boost” (Smith interview 2008). “The businesses hummed, too, you know what I mean? ...I mean, they were selling stuff like crazy because there's all the spill response” (Clark interview 2008). Assessments of the spill’s economic impact note that alongside the economic collapse of several hard hit communities were increased earnings in sectors such as hotels, car rentals, and boat charters, particularly in communities such as Homer, Valdez, and Seward (McDowell Group, 1990). For some people, the infusion of money, temporary residents, and jobs was exciting. “Quite frankly to me, that



was a very exciting time here because something was happening... Lots of jobs, lots of people moving around, there was things going on, it was a real fascinating time” (Johnson interview 2008). The summer of 1989 was characterized as a “boomtown” or “gold rush” community (King interview 2008). The spill helped—in the words of one resident—to “oil the wheels” for economic development in the area (Allen interview 2008). Although the “boomtown” only lasted a summer, investments into businesses and local attractions extended the consequences for Seward far longer.

Because Exxon and VECO relied on contracts with individual operators (fishing boats, etc.) to supplement the national park staff efforts, residents were easily able to profit from the spill. After the oil spill, Alaskan residents coined a new term for people who had profited from the oil spill, combining “spill” and “millionaire” to produce “spillionaire.” As one resident who founded a nature-tourism business recalled, “They don’t call us spillionaires for nothing. I paid off two student loans on that” (Johnson interview 2008). Another long-term resident remembered, “Some of those guys were able to charter their boat out at unprecedented dollar amounts” (Smith interview 2008). The Seward Historic Preservation Commission attributes 500 temporary jobs to the cleanup operation (Seward Historic Preservation Commission, 1996). As another resident said, “No oil came, you know, into the bay here, so it didn’t really bother anybody... We just picked up a lot of money” (Allen interview 2008). Many residents profited from oil spill cleanup activities in Seward, and many described their activities through an ‘entrepreneurial’ framework, stressing their individual ambition, opportunism, and business acuity. Yet what would they do with the capital they had raised?

## **Results, Part II: Investing in nature tourism through changing imaginaries of nature**

In this section, I describe how some cleanup profits were invested in nature tourism businesses, employing excerpts from semi-structured interviews to explore the shift in how residents imagined the potential of nature for tourism. Many residents used the capital from the oil spill cleanup to invest in nature tourism businesses, including charter boat companies, tour companies, bed and breakfast accommodations, and other hospitality businesses. A long-term resident involved in oil spill cleanup recalled,

People looked around after the oil spill and said, this is a pretty neat place and we should stay here, and now we have a whole bunch of money in our pockets, so let’s invest it here. I can guarantee you that the market would not have grown the way it did had it not been for the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill And if you look at Major Marine [tour company], it only happened because of the oil spill. Kenai Coastal Tours [now Kenai Fjords Tours], all of the seed money came from the oil spill (Moore interview 2008). Marchioni (2009, p. 51-52) recorded a similar story in the case of C, who worked aboard a cleanup boat during the oil spill and purchased two boats in 1991 in order to start a sport fishing business. Economic reports indicate that people such as C went on to reap longer-term

benefits from their participation in cleanup efforts. Statewide, Exxon is remembered as a “very big supplier of economic momentum” (Allen, 2010). Firms that participated in the cleanup earned lower incomes in 1988 prior to the spill than those that did not participate, but had higher incomes in 1989—and, anecdotally, Seward residents confirmed that this trend continued (Impact Assessment Inc, 1990). ~~In this section, I describe how some cleanup profits were invested in nature tourism businesses, employing excerpts from semi-structured interviews to explore the shift in how residents imagined the potential of nature for tourism.~~

In order for residents to ‘capitalize’ on nature tourism, they had to see that the surrounding natural resources both existed and could become a source of profit. For many people such as this long-term resident, before Seward became a tourist destination, it was simply their backyard. “I just didn’t think about it... it’s just where we live” (Adams interview 2008). Residents who once took wildlife and scenery for granted began to see new opportunities: “We can even look out the window and see whales or seals or whatever, so we were really overwhelmed that people were excited about that because that’s just the way of life up here” (Jones interview 2008). After hearing about boat tours around the surrounding fjords, one long-time resident decided to participate, and remembered, “I was like, ‘I can’t believe I have not been on this tour because it is absolutely phenomenal.’ And then from your own experience you can say it’s worth every penny that you pay... I know why people come to see it. It’s breathtaking” (Gonzalez interview 2008). New understandings of nature also had to combat the histories of shipping, mining, logging, and fishing that had been important for the community for generations. Reinterpreting natural resources through a nature tourism lens, rather than an extractive lens, required a shift of priorities and a changed understanding of the value of Seward’s natural environment. For example, this former fisherman describes how changing opinions about the natural environment shaped development initiatives, reflecting that, “We’re a lot greener community then we were... Let’s face it, we have a lot of people here who think differently than probably the populace thought back in the... late 60s, early 70s, or even into the 80s...” (Wilson interview 2008).

New businesses focused on the natural environment founded after the spill continue to push the evolution of residents’ understandings of nature. For example, many long-time residents of Seward are astonished at the proliferation of kayaking businesses in town, but have come to realize that the environment was a key draw. “Really, the kayaking thing is one of those where when I moved here, nobody was doing it as a business. It’s] recognizing, “Hold on a second. That’s why a lot of people come here” (Taylor interview 2008). New business owners understood the environment as a pull for visitors. One lodge owner explained the attraction of Seward for visitors as simply: “The beauty of it” (Thompson interview 2008). Newer residents with different priorities have moved to Seward, accelerating the community’s shift towards nature tourism; as one recent arrival said, “It was the scenery... Really, that was the main thing, the main focus when we moved here” (Nelson interview 2008).

While Seward's transformation into a nature-tourism destination was underway by 1989, the oil spill catalyzed the shift in community opinion. In one of the paradoxes of environmental imaginaries, responding to environmental risks not only highlights the *risks* themselves (Moore, 2009, 428) but also the *environment* at risk. Indeed, Seward had appeared in the national media as a tourist attraction in the summer of 1988, only one year before the spill, featured in the *New York Times* as a place where an "outsider" can experience the "sense of being truly in the 49<sup>th</sup> state" (Eiseman, 1988). Community and park leadership recognized the potential economic benefits from the national media attention, and were desperate to protect the town from the damaging oil. The cleanup operation included deploying booms to protect the entrance of Resurrection Bay from the oil, and a vigilant crew that would immediately destroy evidence of oil, according to this national park service employee.

Well, the mayor and the council and stuff were really upset, and when I finally showed up they said, "We don't want a drop of your oil to hit our beaches, because you'll just ruin our tourism business." As soon as a dead oiled bird came on the beaches anywhere around Seward, it was, like, picked up immediately and taken away... They didn't want Seward to look like an oily mess, you know? (Clark interview 2008).

The efforts to protect the bay from oil suggested to residents that something in the bay was worth protecting, yet shielded residents from the environmental damage. A long-term resident said, "If Resurrection Bay had gotten oil, I think it would have been very, very different. The oil spread out... so all the work was being done outside the bay... It was as if the oil spill was out there somewhere, it wasn't here" (Martinez interview 2008). Distanced from the devastation of the spill, residents remembered the economic boom instead. People who associated the oil spill with the creation of new businesses, paying off college loans, and finding short-term, well-paying jobs cemented the connection between the environment and potential income generation. The concern for the environment reinforced an emerging sense that the fjord was a place worthy of protection and an opportunity for profit.

A tangible symbol of the spill's impact on community life was the construction of the Alaska Sea Life Center, completed at a cost of \$56 million in 1998. A year prior to the spill, Seward residents and scientists began lobbying for a cold-water research facility to be located in the community. After the spill and Exxon's civil settlement with the US government and the state of Alaska, the lobbying group was able to pursue the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council to earmark \$25 million of those funds for the construction of the Sea Life Center (Alaska Sea Life Center, 2014). Additional Exxon funding supported initial research projects at the center, and the educational component of the center's work continued to reinforce the value of the environment for the Seward economy. For example, local entrepreneur Jack Scoby constructed office buildings in anticipation of the Sea Life Center's construction, explaining that, "the Sea Life Center is definitely going to bring business to town as a spin off from it" (Damron, 1996). Soon, the center became known as a prominent tourist destination. By 1998, national media

outlets such as the *New York Times* featured the center as the “Western Hemisphere’s foremost cold-water research and rehabilitation center for marine wildlife,” a must-see attraction (Egan, 1998). Congressional earmarks lobbied for by Alaskan Senator Ted Stevens continued to maintain the high profile of the Alaska Sea Life Center throughout the 2000s (Report, 2007).

The acquisitions of Cook Inlet Regional, Incorporated (CIRI) are also representative of the changing interests of the community. Established as a result of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, CIRI is the Alaska Native regional corporation that includes the Seward area. Native corporations operate under powerful neoliberal logics (Ganapathy, 2011) and undertake a variety of business activities for the profit of their Native shareholders. CIRI formed a tourism division in 1997, and quickly purchased the Kenai Fjords Wilderness Lodge located on Fox Island, near Seward, as well as Kenai Fjords Tours, Seward’s original day cruise tour operator. In 1999, CIRI purchased the Seward Windsong Lodge north of Seward, and now also owns Alaskan Heritage Tours and is part owner of an ecotourism lodge near Austin, Texas. Other Native corporations, including the Port Graham Corporation, have also invested in ecotourism ventures near Seward (CIRI, 2014). Native corporations have played a large role in promoting ecotourism in the Seward area, and their activities build on evolving understandings of nature’s profitability.

The year 1989 proved to be a turning point for the community, marking an evolution to a thriving tourist economy. National Park visitation rose from 59,000 in 1988 to almost 264,000 in 1998 (National Park Service, 2010). Tourism businesses also proliferated: in 1989, Seward issued 102 tourism business licenses; ten years later, in 1998, they issued 198, an increase of 94 percent in less than a decade (Goldsmith, 2001). Cruise ship traffic to Seward increased during this same time (Alaska, 2008). Yet these new profitable opportunities were only available for residents who understood the world in an entrepreneurial manner, and were able to perceive the potential rewards—and risks—of establishing different types of businesses. In order to obtain potential benefits from imposing new types of economic rationales over the environment, people weighed the risks and benefits, with the understanding that, “calculation of interest, in a changing environment riddled with aleatory events, is a calculation of risks” (Massumi, 2009, 157). The individualized, performative, and self-disciplining nature of these calculations echoes discussions of neoliberal subject formation (Larner and LeHeron, 2005). After the spill, understandings of ‘nature,’ always complex, became more multifaceted. Nature could be a source of danger, a source of commodifiable resources like timber or oil, or an ‘environment’ that could be commodified through ecotourism. ‘Nature’ also became a wedge for leveraging access to federal or corporate funds, and a new source of community identity.

| **Discussion: progress, precarity, and future implications**

In this paper, I argued that the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill cleanup efforts accelerated the development of nature tourism in Seward, Alaska both by allowing residents to capitalize on profits from cleanup efforts with an “~~entrepreneurial~~entrepreneurial spirit” and by taking advantage of changing imaginaries of the natural environment. The spill highlights a discrete moment where the construction of nature as a multifaceted, socially produced, and *differently* commodifiable imaginary took shape.

Yet the outcomes of tourism development in Seward are ambiguous. As Widener (2009) writes, tourism development is accompanied by inequality, creating unaffordable living conditions for residents priced out of local accommodation, often replacing previous economic opportunities with low-paying service-sector jobs, and transferring profits from tourism outside the community. Seward’s nature-tourism development has brought similar consequences, from second homebuyers encroaching on the local real estate market to local employers replacing local students with European temporary workers to fill seasonal service-sector jobs. Framing development in terms of driven ‘entrepreneurs’ bypassing others who lacked ability to take risks and profit from the spill response is one response to the ambiguity of Seward’s changing community life. An explanation highlighting ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ within Seward’s economic transformation taps into neoliberal state frameworks emphasizing competition rather than exchange, where state practices ensure “inequalities that must be instituted and constantly nourished and maintained” so that the market can function (Lazzarato, 2009, 116). The tendency of Seward residents to attribute their economic change to the “entrepreneurial spirit” accepts such neoliberal inequalities as the taken-for-granted ground upon which individual success rests, adhering to what Feldman et al. (2011) call a ‘bootstrap’ version of citizenship. In this framework, collective demands to address the causes of inequality become eclipsed by individual drive and ability to pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps. Bootstrap citizens with “entrepreneurial spirit” accept inequality as a foundation for progress, risking further polarization and marginalization of the ‘losers’ within the community.

Yet bootstrap citizenship may also be a response to increased inequality and risk within community life. With the collapse of the shipping industry during the 1964 earthquake and the decreased prominence of extractive activities such as logging, mining, and fishing for the Seward economy, sources of income in this small community have become more precarious. New types of jobs, such as working for the national park or nearby prison, appeal to transient as well as long-time residents, rendering economic prospects in the community more unreliable. Describing personal success through the “entrepreneurial spirit” exerts a sense of agency over a rapidly-changing economy, attributing economic potential to individual drive rather than wider neoliberal processes of economic restructuring. Spinning precariousness into potential also reinforces neoliberal economic transformation, mimicking neoliberal practices which are a “social project that seeks to create a reality that it suggests already exists” (Larner and LeHeron, 2005, 12) The dual nature of the “entrepreneurial spirit”—as a foundation for progress or a

cover-up for precarity—provides a specific example of the interconnectivity of tourism and capital accumulation, addressing the call by Bianchi (2009) for a critical turn in tourism studies.

This paper also responds to calls within tourism studies to explore nature as a construction, rather than simply a location or an amenity. ~~I argue that~~ the construction of nature in Seward as conducive to nature tourism intensified during and after the oil spill cleanup process, ~~but it also~~ must be situated within global, national, and regional processes as well. Global trends promoting nature tourism development and increased environmental awareness (Brida and ~~Zepata~~, 2010) intersected with catalytic moments in the US national context, when oil discoveries in Alaska prompted Alaska Native land claims and new national protected areas to take shape. These elements came together with Seward's history of tourism promotion, as well as a local economy that had never recovered from the 1964 earthquake, providing a local community particularly receptive to the influx of 'spillionaire' cash from the oil spill cleanup. Yet without a transformation in local residents' understandings of the potential of their surroundings for nature tourism, none of these elements would have coalesced in Seward and transformed the local economy. Residents had to see whales where once they just saw a local 'way of life;' they had to recognize, as one resident explained, that, "Hold on a second. That's why a lot of people come here" (Taylor interview 2008). The transformation of nature in Seward represents a long-term shift in public perception, and contributed to the community's economic growth in the past 25 years.

Basing entrepreneurial activities on a newly imagined version of 'nature' also has its drawbacks. Nature tourism harnesses a construction of nature as separate from human activity, pristine and untouched. Nature tourism distinguishes itself from conventional tourism by its ability to access authentic and exotic natural areas, yet the pristine character of these areas is at risk. Enabled by the spilled oil, the nature tourism activities of the enterprise subjects themselves have begun to put pressure on the natural environment of the fjord. "You can't get close to the sea lions... that's just part of the world right now," one resident said (Adams interview 2008). The lack of regulation and increased numbers of tour boats in the fjords trouble many residents (King interview 2008). In some ways, residents believe that the new businesses and the growth in popularity of the national park have damaged the environment more than they protect it. "What we've done, of course, is just the opposite – [the park is] not protected at all. We're invading that area... So they used this word "protection" and "preserve" and all that stuff, and all it does is bring people..." (Lewis interview 2008). The gradual degradation of the environment and the resources upon which nature tourism depends echoes arguments made by James O'Connor (1998) and others about the proclivity of capitalism to destroy the very "conditions of production" upon which its sustained activity depends.

The imaginaries of nature which fueled tourism development in Seward also have consequences for residents themselves. The cleanup itself was traumatic for many locals, with residents noting increased mental and physical health problems, disruptions to family life, and

increased community conflict (Impact Assessment Inc, 1990). Seward residents are beginning to recognize how the transformation of their community by the “entrepreneurial spirit” has created these sorts of tradeoffs, laying waste to certain ways of being even as the tourism industry continues to grow. The conflict between tourist charter boats and commercial fishermen is emblematic of the ambivalence created by the rise of the enterprise subject, as commercial fishing becomes, as Douglas (1966) writes, ‘matter out of place’ in a tourist town: “It used to be fishing. We were fishing, we worked the docks and we’d go to a job. It’s like everybody is posing now... It doesn’t seem like Seward” (Green interview 2008).

The example of Seward and residents’ construction of nature there has particular resonance within the US context because of Alaska’s outsized hold on imaginaries of nature in the United States. Oil has played a central role in generations of struggles over Alaskan land use and development that have taken shape on the US national stage, from the debates over the extraction of North Slope oil in the late 1970s and the damages of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill twenty years later, to the controversies over plans for offshore oil and gas development in Arctic waters today. Alaska continues to hold powerful influence over the American imagination both as site of resource extraction or pioneer adventures, but also as a potential conservation legacy, as John McPhee’s (1977, p. 88) describes: “They forget that we *all* own Alaska. They call it their land, but it’s everybody’s land... This river, this land around us, is of national interest, and it belongs to everybody in the United States.” The example of Seward suggests how the local community both absorbs and acts outside of national debates regarding environmental protection and extractive development, and can develop individual, opportunistic responses to disasters.

Yet long-term consequences of the infusion of oil spill cleanup capital that allowed for investment in nature tourism in Seward are also relevant to other locations worldwide where environmental disasters and tourism efforts collide (Widener, 2009). While the effects of disasters such as oil spills on the tourism industry in various locations have been widely studied, most of these studies focus on the short-term, acute consequences of the disaster for the tourism industry, as well as the efforts of tourism management to prepare adequately for disasters. Scholars have focused less on the long-term consequences of disasters for local tourism industries, and the example of Seward gestures towards the need for additional scholarship about how communities perceive tourism over time; the impacts of population changes on the expansion of tourism; and the long-term consequences of a shift in community economic priorities such as degradation of natural areas. What the example of Seward demonstrates is that the spilled petroleum continues to impact life and livelihoods in Seward more than twenty-five years later, continuing to act as a catalyst for multifaceted community change.

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