

The Oceans

On March 24, 1989, the oil tanker Exxon Valdez spilled 11 million gallons of oil into Alaskan waters. The accident could have been much worse; the spilled oil represented only 6% of the ship's cargo. Even so, the shoreline more than 100 miles away remains polluted with oil, despite billions of dollars of "clean-up." The ultimate damage to the environment will not be known for years.

Oil spills are not the only threat to the oceans. About one quarter of North American waste water is dumped directly into the sea, including millions of pounds of toxic chemicals. Some solid waste also is dumped at sea, out of sight of the shore. The hypodermic needles and other medical waste washing up on our beaches are only the most visible signs.

Much of the life of the sea is nurtured by natural bays and marshes along the coastline. But many of these natural areas have been destroyed by unrestrained development.

The pollution of the seas already threatens shellfish in many areas. In the future, it could seriously diminish the supply of fish needed to feed the world's population. Plankton -- microscopic marine plants -- help remove carbon dioxide from the air, and provide the ultimate food source for most creatures in the ocean's food chain. If they are lost by oceanic pollution, the result will be global catastrophe.