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OIL SPILL FACTS

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Questions and Answers

Where is the *Exxon Valdez* today?

After several changes of name and ownership, the tanker was converted for hauling bulk ore in the South China Sea. Following a collision with a cargo ship in November 2012, the ore carrier was sold, again renamed, and then resold for scrap and routed to India. A court dispute to prevent the ship from being beached in India was resolved when the Supreme Court of India granted permission to the owners to beach the ship for dismantling. The former *TV Exxon Valdez* was beached on August 2, 2012. For more details, see [After the Big Spill, What Happened to the Ship Exxon Valdez?](#) at the [NOAA website](#).


How did the accident happen?

The National Transportation Safety Board investigated the accident and determined that the probable causes of the grounding were:

1. The failure of the third mate to properly maneuver the vessel, possibly due to fatigue and excessive workload;
2. the failure of the master to provide a proper navigation watch, possibly due to impairment from alcohol;
3. the failure of Exxon Shipping Company to supervise the master and provide a rested and sufficient crew for the *Exxon Valdez*;
4. the failure of the U.S. Coast Guard to provide an effective vessel traffic system; and
5. the lack of effective pilot and escort services.

Okay. But what actually happened?

The *Exxon Valdez* departed from the Trans Alaska Pipeline terminal at 9:12 pm March 23, 1989. William Murphy, an expert ship's pilot hired to maneuver the 986-foot vessel through the Valdez Narrows, was in control of the wheelhouse. At his side was the captain of the vessel, Joe Hazelwood. Helmsman Harry Claar was steering. After passing through Valdez Narrows, pilot Murphy left the vessel and Captain Hazelwood took over the wheelhouse. The *Exxon Valdez* encountered icebergs in the shipping lanes and Captain Hazelwood ordered Claar to take the *Exxon Valdez* out of the shipping lanes to go around the icebergs. He then handed over control of the wheelhouse to Third Mate Gregory Cousins with precise instructions to turn back into the shipping lanes when the tanker reached a certain point. At that time, Claar was replaced by Helmsman Robert Kagan. For reasons that remain unclear, Cousins and Kagan failed to make the turn back into the shipping lanes and the ship ran aground on Bligh Reef at 12:04 am March 24, 1989. Captain Hazelwood was in his quarters at the time.



[LISTEN](#) to Captain Hazelwood's radio call to the [Valdez Vessel Traffic Center](#).

Can I have more detail, please?

Here's a detailed account of the accident as reported by the Alaska Oil Spill Commission in its 1990 [Final Report](#).

Was the captain drunk?

The captain was seen in a local bar, admitted to having some alcoholic drinks, and a blood test showed alcohol in his blood even several hours after the accident. The captain has always insisted that he was not impaired by alcohol. The state charged him with operating a vessel while under the influence of alcohol. A jury in Alaska, however, found him NOT GUILTY of that charge. The jury did find him guilty of negligent discharge of oil, a misdemeanor. Hazelwood was fined \$50,000 and sentenced to 1,000 hours of community service in Alaska (*State of Alaska v. Hazelwood*). He completed the community service ahead of schedule in 2001. He picked up trash along the Seward Highway and worked at Bean's Cafe, a "soup kitchen" for the homeless in Anchorage, Alaska.

What's being done to prevent another *Exxon Valdez*-type accident?

See the [Spill Prevention and Response](#) page for a thorough answer.

How much oil was spilled?

Approximately 11 million gallons or 257,000 barrels or 35,000 metric tonnes (38,800 short tons). *Picture the swimming pool at your school or in your community. The amount of spilled oil is roughly equivalent to 17 olympic-sized swimming pools.*

How much oil was the *Exxon Valdez* carrying?

53,094,510 gallons or 1,264,155 barrels