

Cheryl Lowry  
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The Valdez article summarized many of the points Birkland made in the “Focusing Events, Mobilization, and Agenda Setting” and “Business and Political Dimensions in Disaster Management. Birkland discusses how disasters shape policy. Larger scale concentrated events, or “focus events”, receive more attention than chronic problems, despite copious data collection. The suddenness of disasters gives politically disadvantaged groups a window of opportunity to have their concerns heard by politicians and policymakers. They can also lead to the formation or growth of powerful activist groups. Interest groups have differing agendas, and Birkland emphasizes the need to understand both the motivation behind groups and the facts that lead to their mobilization. Perception of a problem is sometimes more influential than the actual problem.

Oil spills draw particular attention and public demands for action and accountability. This attitude is fueled by ever-present media showing distressing pictures of soiled beaches and dying wildlife. Birkland points out that while accountability and fixing blame are important functions, perhaps society’s dependence on oil is the root of the problem. Rather than finding corporate fault, it would be better to “find ways to avoid these accidents and mitigate their effects”.

Birkland discusses the difficult balance between economics and environmental concerns. This was especially true for Alaska, where the local and state economies are heavily dependent on fishing and the oil industry. The Valdez oil spill in Alaska was specifically illustrative of environment vs. economy. Alaska had been seen as a pristine frontier, and environmental groups had concerns about environmental effects of the oil industry even before the Valdez; Valdez vindicated their cause.

The Valdez incident was also important because it showed spill mitigation policy had failed. Legislation was in place but damage liability limits were far too low. The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 required greater assumption of cleanup responsibility from the Federal government and oil companies. Specifically, the OPA called for emergency response plans, double hulls for ships operating in the US, and allowed state preemption (states could pass laws that were more strict than Federal laws, but not less strict.). The full provisions of the OPA have not been implemented yet due to their complexity. Regional citizens’ advisory councils were established. The councils fund research and are involved in policy revision.

Environmental protection is a contentious emotionally charged issue for environmentalists, citizens, politicians, and big business, with competing interests. At the time of the Valdez article oil was inexpensive, and demand was high. Birkland says we are treating the symptoms, not the problem. The only real way to decrease risk of spills is to decrease oil consumption. Policy typically focuses on reaction and response; it would be wiser to concentrate on prevention and mitigation strategies.

Since this was written, oil prices have increased dramatically. It will be interesting to see if that has any effect on activist groups and business. Will they create political pressure to develop alternative energy sources, or to encourage drilling in the Alaskan wilderness? Both scenarios have far different ramifications and effect disaster potential.