

Messing with cleanup: following wild animals who survive environmental disasters

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An oil covered sea otter in his cage outside an animal rescue centre, 1 April 1989

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Large-scale environmental disasters are on the rise. Reports of oil spills, pipeline and gas leaks, and nuclear power plant meltdowns appear almost mundane in their frequency. Research into these human-caused catastrophic events justifiably asks why or how they happened: what breakdowns in regulation, for example, or what human errors. But very little scholarship evaluates disaster aftermath. This is a critical gap. In the aftermath of environmental disasters the socio-ecological relations that constitute humankind and its political economies are brought into relief. During such upheaval, these relations can be challenged and re-thought or are reproduced. I am interested specifically in the reconfiguration of human-animal relations through disaster cleanup, a space-time in which wildlife management regimes are intensified through restoration and rehabilitation efforts that are funded by fines issued to guilty parties. This paper offers preliminary reflections on these regimes and a research program for investigating them. My analytic frame consists of Foucauldian ideas of biopower and pastoral power, a case study of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill cleanup in Alaska, and a driving question: what else besides oil does cleanup leave behind?

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