

Alaska's Copper River Delta by Riki Ott

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by Pete Lavigne

Alaska is for me, like many others who have been exposed to its wonders, the most magnificent place on earth. A teacher of mine, in a course called Wisdom, maintains that beauty is one of three areas (as well as spirituality and truth) in which humans have access to the eternal. There is perhaps no place on earth where that concept shines more brightly than in Alaska.

Alaska's beauty is hard to capture in a book, though many have tried over the years. Few have done it as brilliantly as **Alaska's Copper River Delta**, by Alaskan activist, artist, fisher, and scientist Riki Ott. A product of a collaboration between the Copper River Watershed Project and the Netherlands based Artists for Nature Foundation, the book and its artwork is stunning and breathtaking.

Riki Ott, for those who know her, is both a force of nature and a force for nature. My introduction to Riki, who then served with me on the Board of the Alaska Clean Water Alliance (ACWA), came on a five person kayak trip to the Beardslee Islands in Glacier Bay National Park in 1995. I was immediately captivated by Riki's "life is too short to speak in complete sentences" intense, rapid fire humor, energy and intellect.

Ott has an incredible ability to enroll people into discussion and action about whatever issue or opportunity is at hand. As a self-styled "second generation activist" (her Dad was a co-founder of the Environmental Defense Fund) it was unsurprising that in her first trip to Cordova at the edge of the Copper River Delta in 1985, she became captivated by its beauty, wild country and wild politics. Her summer trip in 1985 turned into a permanent move as she stayed, fishing a drift gillnet permit for the following ten years.

Situated on the eastern flank of Prince William Sound, the Copper River Delta was near ground zero when the Exxon Valdez hit the rocks in 1989. Riki Ott was at the center of that oil storm, which, though thanks to prevailing winds it completely missed the Delta, inflicted lasting physical and economic damage on the region.

The spill's impacts on her have been lasting as well. Ott, who has a Ph.D. in marine biology from the University of Washington specializing in sediment toxicology, was the source of instant, expert analysis in media reports on the spill from day one. The Exxon spill galvanized her commitment to social change and environmental protection and justice.

Prodigious quantities of precipitation fall on this rare, subarctic coastal temperate rainforest. During the spring migration 5 to 7 million birds stop to feed on the Delta's food reserves. The 287-mile Copper River drains the world's largest glacier outside of

Greenland and the polar caps, and the mountains that tower over the basin include nine of the continent's 15 tallest peaks. The watershed is home to 5,600 human residents, half of whom live in Cordova, which can be reached only by boat or plane. The rest live in 21 small settlements mostly located on upper river tributaries.

The 700,000 acre Copper River Delta is the largest contiguous wetland on the Pacific coast of North America. During the spring migration, 5-7 million birds stop to feed on the Delta's food reserves. The largely undeveloped watershed is also host to sockeye, silver and ling salmon, moose, brown and black bear, wolves, endangered Steller sea lions, and a host of other mammals, fish and birds.

Over ninety percent of the watershed is public land and the Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve make up a large portion of the northeastern part of the watershed and the federal Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service and the State of Alaska own the bulk of the remainder of the public lands. The large majority of the private lands are held by native corporations.

Ott's expertise in hydrocarbon toxicology in marine sediments led her to challenge Exxon scientists dealing with the spill who claimed that the oil and its negative effects would dissipate from the waters and beaches within a few years. For example, during a presentation at an Exxon sponsored oil spill conference in Atlanta in 1993, Exxon scientists concluded that wildlife was "thriving" in the Sound, the recovery was remarkably rapid and there were no long-term effects from the spill. Ott notes that at the same time as the Atlanta conference the herring population crashed in the Sound by 80-90%, while surviving fish showed visible lesions from a virus. Lab tests found that exposure to low levels of oil can compromise immune systems of adult fish and lead to viral disease.

Recent investigations on the tenth anniversary of the Exxon spill, including a broadcast in March by 60 Minutes, have proven Ott right. The sediment on many of the beaches cleaned up after the spill are still soaked with oil just beneath the surface. Scientific studies released by the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council in January 1999 show only two species (bald eagles and river otters) have fully recovered from the spill. Ecosystem-wide studies show connections between the loss of herring and lack of recovery to birds, fish and mammals in oiled areas of the Sound.

Ott writes, "The spill triggered a series of events from which the Sound is still recovering. Genetic damage, reproductive impairment, and ripple effects detonated ecosystemwide injury and delayed recovery in a variety of invertebrates, fish, birds and marine mammals."

The spill, she says, devastated Cordova "economically and spiritually. Well before the economic damages became apparent, townspeople experienced intense anguish over suffering and dying animals in the Sound, a gut response that doesn't go away for months, reflecting the deep spiritual emotional and physical connections people share with their natural environment... The pattern of harvesting and sharing which forms the critical link between the community and the environment, and among families

and communities members, was shattered. Violent crime, domestic abuse and calls to the mental health crisis hotline increased.”

As fishing stocks declined to a post-spill low point in 1993, Ott used her creative talents to design award winning fiber art quilts and pillows depicting the animals and scenery of the Delta and Prince William Sound and gave up fishing entirely in 1995 when she went on the staff of the Alaska Clean Water Alliance.

Ott’s dismay over threats to the Delta from proposed new roads, clearcut logging on national forest and native corporation private lands, and renewed mining proposals for the Delta, led her to propose the formation of a ‘Copper River Delta Project’ to ACWA’s board in 1995. The CRDP focused on developing an environmentally and economically sustainable future for Cordova and the Delta.

The CRDP started a series of economic development studies, community discussions and visioning sessions, which, among other results, led to the expansion of the focus of the Delta Project to the entire Copper River Watershed in 1997 and incorporation as an independent organization later that year. Early in the process in 1994, Ott also enrolled the Netherlands based Artists For Nature Foundation (ANF) to take on the Copper River Delta for its next project.

The ANF is a worldwide organization whose mission is to use the unique perspective of artists to protect natural and historical landscapes. By showing nature through the arts, ANF works to persuade decision-makers of the importance of the natural and cultural heritages of the places over which they have influence. In 1995 and again in 1996, a total of 23 artists from around the world (including Haines based Tim Shields) visited Cordova and the Delta to create the works now represented in the book. Some 140 photos, paintings, engravings, woodcuts, sculptures are recreated in this beautifully produced and brilliantly colored collection.

In addition to the book, the artworks from the project are on tour to art museums throughout the world over the next two years. The exhibition opened in Anchorage in May 1998 and will appear at Seattle’s Frye Art Museum June 18th to September 5th 1999.

Peter Lavigne regularly volunteers for Alaska environmental protection causes. Non-residents may support the Copper River Watershed Project with a non-voting membership contribution of \$25 or more mailed to CRWP, P.O. Box 1560, Cordova, AK 99574.