

AMERICA'S WILDEST REFUGE: THE ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Unparalleled Wilderness Values

Since the 1950s, prominent scientists and conservationists have been calling the Arctic Refuge America's "Last Great Wilderness." The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has called the Arctic Refuge "one of the finest examples of wilderness left on the planet," containing "remote, complete, and undisturbed habitats" which are home to "some of the most diverse and spectacular wildlife in the Arctic."

By definition, wilderness is a place where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, retaining its primeval character and influence, protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions. It is a place that appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, where the imprint of man's work is substantially unnoticeable. A Resource Assessment of the Arctic Refuge prepared by the federal government in 1987 found that virtually the entire coastal plain of the refuge meets the wilderness criteria established in the 1964 Wilderness Act. These wilderness values would be irreparably damaged if an industrial oil complex were constructed in the heart of the Arctic Refuge.

National Wildlife Refuge Status

The Arctic Refuge is one of America's largest, wildest, and most pristine National Wildlife Refuges. Each of the more than 540 wildlife refuges in America's National Wildlife Refuge System is managed for the primary purpose of wildlife conservation.

By law, industrial activities like oil drilling can only occur on National Wildlife Refuges if such activities are formally determined to be compatible with wildlife conservation. Oil drilling has never been found to be compatible with wildlife conservation on any National Wildlife Refuge anywhere in the United States.

The Center of Wildlife Activity

The coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge, where special interests look to drill, is the biological heart of what is now an intact, wild Arctic ecosystem. The area is often called "America's Serengeti" because it is home to one of the world's last great herds of caribou and a variety of other wildlife including wolves, grizzlies, and rare musk oxen. The coastal plain includes some of the most important onshore denning habitat for polar bears in the United States.

The millions of birds that nest, migrate through, or spend the winter in the coastal plain are conspicuous and fundamental parts of the refuge ecosystem. This spectacular wildlife area is the targeted zone for proposed industrial oil development, which would damage and fragment wildlife habitat, and mar the landscape with frequent spills of oil and toxic chemicals.

Refuge Under Seige

The coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge lies on Alaska's north coast between the Beaufort Sea, the Brooks Range and the Prudhoe Bay oil fields. Already, 95 percent of Alaska's North Slope is open to drilling. The 110-mile coastal plain-- the most biologically-productive area

and the center of wildlife activity on the Refuge -- represents the last remnant of the North Slope closed to development -- for now.

The last few sessions of Congress saw full-on legislative battles to open the Refuge to oil drilling. Due to avid public support for protecting the Arctic Refuge from devastating drilling, these measures have failed.

Footprints on the Tundra

The oil industry claims drilling will not harm the habitat and wildlife of the fragile coastal plain. However, extreme temperatures, a short growing season, and ice limit the speed of the Arctic ecosystem's ability to recover from degradation. Despite impressive technological advances, even "responsible" drilling cannot mitigate the noise from traffic and facilities, the extraction of gravel, water loss, and the blockage of water flow, snow laced with metals such as zinc and lead, and air pollution.

The scars left on the land by drilling would extend outward in a network potentially including: 50 to 60 gravel drill sites and waste pits; three production facilities; one to three sea water treatment plants; three more airports; 280 miles of roads; ten to 15 gravel excavation sites; 100 to 150 miles of main pipeline; one to five pump stations; two to three gravel causeways; two to three marine facilities; two solid waste disposal dumps; housing for 1,500 workers; and sewage treatment, maintenance and administration facilities. A massive industrial complex would be born - on a wildlife refuge!

Today, no suitable alternative habitat exists for the Porcupine Caribou Herd if they are driven from their calving grounds by oil development. The Department of the Interior (DOI) believes that oil development would contribute to a 20-40 percent decline in the caribou population. The DOI also determined that musk oxen populations would decline by 25-50 percent and wolverine populations by 50 percent. Polar bears are particularly at risk as they are highly sensitive to human disturbances and likely to abandon their dens.

The lessons of 20 years of oil production at nearby Prudhoe Bay demonstrate the damage caused by drilling:

- Contrary to oil industry claims, oil field facilities at Prudhoe Bay are not harmless to the Central Arctic caribou population. Female caribou with newborn calves have been extremely sensitive to surface development and human activity. Over time, calving caribou withdrew from the general oilfield area and sought acceptable habitats elsewhere. Calving no longer occurs in the original Prudhoe Bay complex, and calf production and survival were occasionally very low near the oilfields.

Prudhoe Bay has averaged 500 oil spills a year. From 1972 to 1986 the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation reported 23,000 spills of oil and other hazardous materials on the North Slope. Yearly emissions of air pollutants on the North slope include at least 4,000 tons of hydrocarbons, more than 600 tons of methane gas, and 6,000 to 27,000 tons of nitrogen oxide - as much as in

Economics

Drilling proponents assert that oil from the Arctic Refuge is the only viable prospect to significantly decrease our national dependence on foreign oil, increase national security, and develop a sound national energy strategy. A close look at the facts shows a very different picture.

- The United States consumes 26 percent of the world's oil. Considering that by the most optimistic figures, the Arctic Refuge will yield only 0.4 percent of the world's known oil reserves, Arctic oil will not significantly decrease our dependence on foreign oil.
- The lifting of the 22 year-old export ban on Alaskan oil in 1995 illustrated that oil from the Arctic Refuge was not needed for national security reasons.
- Simply raising the corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) standard for new cars by ten miles per gallon would save more oil in one year than all the commercially recoverable oil estimated to be found in the fragile coastal plain. Instead of feeding our national addiction to oil, a strong national energy policy must work towards energy efficiency and conservation.

Nature's Bounty

Even though it constitutes a small piece of the immense Arctic Refuge, the coastal plain is the most biologically-productive area and the center of wildlife activity. The Porcupine caribou herd migrates annually to the coastal plain to give birth to and nurse its young. The area's isolation from predators and high quality vegetation maximize calf and herd survival. Archaeological evidence shows that the herd has used the coastal plain as a calving area for over two million years. More than 200 other species of wildlife call the coastal plain home, including grizzly and polar bears, wolves, Dall sheep, wolverines, arctic foxes, musk oxen, arctic peregrine falcons, and golden eagles. The coastal plain provides important habitat for the Beaufort Sea polar bear population, and is the most significant area for on-shore denning in the United States. More than 100 bird species from four continents utilize the coastal plain during migration. The most dramatic migratory bird display is the 300,000 snow geese that visit this rich ecological area each summer. In addition, the rivers and coastal waters are vital habitat for more than 36 species of fish.

The Refuge offers unsurpassed opportunities for visitors to find solitude and adventure in a land still wild and untrammelled by civilization. That's why visitors from around the world come to camp, float wild rivers, hike the high country, and watch wildlife spectacles in the vast open spaces.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the only national wildlife refuge in North America that protects a complete spectrum of Arctic landscape features and wildlife populations. The fight to save the Arctic Refuge hinges on keeping the coastal plain safe from the devastating effects of oil and gas drilling. We must succeed in this effort, not only for the benefit of the refuge's birds and wildlife, but also to preserve its beauty, its enduring wilderness value, and the overall integrity of America's natural heritage.

ARCTIC REFUGE TIMELINE

2007

Bipartisan legislation is introduced to designate the Arctic as wilderness to permanently protect it. The Bush FY2008 budget proposal calls for drilling the Arctic Refuge to raise revenues.

2006

New bills to open the refuge are introduced in the House and Senate, with one passing the House and awaiting the Senate's consideration.

2005

A provision allowing drilling is included in the annual budget but eventually removed after moderate Republicans refuse to vote for any budget that includes such a provision. Drilling authorization is also included in an energy bill and passed by the U.S. House of Representatives, but is again stopped by the U.S. Senate. A last-minute provision to allow drilling is added to the annual defense appropriations bill, but meets with a filibuster in the Senate and is eventually removed.

2004

The U.S. House of Representatives was unable to muster enough support to attach a provision to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the "slimmed down" version of their energy bill. No action taken on the issue in the U.S. Senate.

2003

U.S. House of Representatives includes provision opening the Arctic Refuge to drilling to the 2003 energy bill. The Senate votes to keep drilling provisions out of their version of the energy bill. A House-Senate Conference Committee meets to craft a final energy bill that could meet the approval of both the House and Senate. The initial bill crafted by the leaders includes the House-passed drilling provisions. At the last minute, the provisions are stripped from the Committee's bill. The House approves the final energy bill as passed by the Conference Committee. The Senate - by a mere two votes - stops the bill from moving forward days before Congress adjourns for the year.

2002

The U.S. Senate votes to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from oil and gas drilling, and keep the 2001 House-passed provision out of the final energy bill.

2001

U.S. House of Representatives passes legislation to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas drilling. Legislation passed as part of the House's overall energy bill. Moves to Senate for action.

2000

The Wilderness bill S.867 garners 28 co-sponsors, but again, was not debated in Congress.

1999

The Wilderness bill received a record 165 cosponsors but had not been heard in committee.

1998

Wilderness bill receives a record 151 cosponsors but is not heard in committee.

1981 - 1998

Bill to designate the coastal plain as Wilderness is introduced annually but is never brought to a vote.

1995

Rider permitting oil development on the coastal plain is attached onto an appropriations bill. President Clinton vetoes the bill.

1991

Bill to open the coastal plain to oil development is narrowly defeated on the Senate floor.

1987

The FWS, under Interior Secretary Don Hodel, issues a report supporting oil exploration on the coastal plain.

1980

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) expands the area to over 19 million acres and redesignates it a national wildlife refuge. ANILCA prohibits oil and gas development on the coastal plain, but allows the opportunity for a future act of Congress to permit it.

1960

The Arctic National Wildlife Range is created by President Eisenhower.