

William E. Brown

Box 65: Commentary from the GWS office and our members

Thoughts on the Arctic Refuge's Future

I remember the shock that swept the country when the *Exxon Valdez* became grounded on Bligh Reef in 1989. Day after day the crude oil spewing from her punctured hull spread at whim of wind and current. Eventually the black muck coated a thousand miles of mainland and island coastline, killing countless sea mammals, birds, and fish. Who can forget the nightly pictures of doomed, oil-soaked creatures staring at us from the TV screen? The residues of this calamitous spill still poison Alaska's Pacific shores and the animals that live there.

This was a singular event. The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 had transformed Alaska from Seward's Folly and Gold Rush plunder into America's last citadel of expansive wild lands. Nearly two-thirds of the nation's protected lands—national wildlife refuges, national parks, national wild and scenic rivers—were created by that single act of Congress. In a mystical, even repentant way, we as a nation had tried in Alaska to make up for what we had done to most of the country Down Below. But the oil spill had shaken our vision of this remote domain.

Now, these spectacular and biologically stunning shores where harmony existed, where "the wild ran free upon the crisp fresh land," have lost that freshness. They have joined the larger neighborhood where industrial accidents routinely happen and are as routinely dismissed: "An anomaly. Statistically insignificant. Part of the external costs of progress and industry." Neither these places nor our luminous vision of them will ever be quite the same again.



So far, the 19-million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has been lucky, despite its proximity to Prudhoe Bay and adjacent oil fields. Now comes the push to get inside the refuge. Why? Is our national security at risk because of dependence on foreign-oil imports? That's what Alaska's congressional delegation and its political and corporate allies say. But these are the same people who in 1995 lifted the ban on Alaska oil exports. Prudhoe oil sold to Japan resulted in higher gas prices on the West Coast—to the benefit of Alaska's oil-tax revenues, the profits of big oil, and the campaign funds of the politicians.

Given these bottom-line realities, and the prodigal waste of oil since the discarding of President Carter's energy conservation programs (and the

mindless perpetuation of such waste in the Bush Administration's new energy policy), the national security argument fails to persuade.

Beyond the dollar sign, the urgent rationale for a new Arctic oil rush flows from the pending implosion of Alaska's fading oil boom. As in territorial days, modern Alaska still depends on a colonial economy—by definition a boom-and-bust economy. It exports raw materials (principally oil) and imports virtually everything that it eats and uses to support its inflated urban lifestyle and population. Excepting traditionalists who live off the land, modern Alaska depends on Prudhoe Bay oil as the engine of its economy. But that oil draws down and the pipeline flows at half capacity. So the rush is on to develop a combined oil-and-natural-gas extension of the boom. That's where the Arctic Refuge comes in.

No one knows whether the refuge's geologic structures hold oil, or, if so, how much. U.S. Geological Survey estimates indicate a potential for a large oil discovery of several billion barrels—which would translate to a few months' equivalent of the nation's annual rate of consumption. Experts are skeptical of a mega-giant field of Prudhoe or Persian Gulf scale.

Are these same old, same old ploys reason enough to invade the Arctic Refuge? I don't think so. At the least we should conserve Arctic oil resources until we're forced to use them for valid societal purposes, i.e., in the transition from prodigality to sustainability, under a rational national energy regime that combines conservation, alternative energy sources, and fossil-fuel production. All we have now, and for at least the next four years, is wanton waste, which means the wanton impairment and destruction, in part, of a very special place.



More than 20 years ago I conducted historic-site surveys along the Arctic Coastal Plain for the North Slope Borough, both within and adjacent to the Arctic Refuge. For longer periods I worked on a cultural landscape plan with the Inupiat people of Nuiqsut, a small village near the mouth of the Colville River, west of the refuge. During extended visits I was privileged to accompany village elders to several hunting-and-fishing, historic, and sacred sites. These tradition bearers shared with me their cultural history in these places. Their stories gave me great appreciation of the people, their homeland, and the creatures that sustain their lives and culture.

The Nuiqsut people were concerned about oil developments in their traditional lands. Because these hunter-gatherers live in a spare Arctic desert, they must roam far and wide, as do the animals they hunt for food. The traditional-use area of the Nuiqsut people is as big as a good-sized state Down Below.

My job was to listen and observe as these people pursued their way of life in a homeland they have occupied for thousands of years. Then to translate—for the invading world from Outside—their concerns for their

homeland. Then, maybe, the Outsiders would see the value of these seemingly barren lands and seas. And be careful how they would use them.

After many drafts and discussions we finally agreed on this translation, this approximation of their core ideas:

The cultural landscape of Nuiqsut is occupied by a heritage community that perpetuates Inupiat culture by harvesting the wild resources of land and sea, by preserving places and ideals of value, and by transmitting this heritage to future generations. It is a place that cannot be truly owned by any transient human group nor consumed for any ephemeral human purpose, for it must be passed on intact. It is a cosmos that unites time and space, people and nature, resources and values. This place cannot be understood in simple economic or physical-resource terms. Such tools of understanding are too primitive. Yet those from afar who have plans to alter this landscape are using such primitive tools, as did their predecessors.

Sometimes I lose my way and wonder what it's all about—these endless struggles to hold on to the valued places of this world. Then I go back to this statement, to these ideas that I finally understood after many evenings of sitting around campfires in the lee of a skin boat listening to old people in skin clothes who haltingly—with the help of a translator—told me what it's all about.



Why were these people worried about oil developments in their homeland? Because they had seen Prudhoe Bay and the other oil fields. They had even worked in them. They knew that oil development is fraught with catastrophe, especially in the Arctic. What are some of the things they feared? Here is a sampler:

- Oil and chemical spills into rivers and Arctic seas that would kill under-ice algae, the first link in the Polar marine food chain;
- Disturbance of caribou calving and snow-geese nesting sites, with international implications for Alaskan and Canadian indigenes;
- Industrial sprawl from collection and distribution pipelines, residence and work camps, roads, power and pump stations, etc.;
- Industrial-scale water needs that would drain ponds and lakes for many miles around every development site—all of them fish-spawning, nursery, or overwintering water bodies;
- The immeasurable aesthetic violation and disaster;
- And on, and on, and on.



But I want to stop this catalogue of bad things that will happen in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—if it is opened to oil development. For I want to conclude with the wisdom of the Inupiat elders, whose principal goal is to pass on intact the homeland over which each generation temporarily exercises stewardship.

The views and values of these homeland people have capacity for infinite expansion and application to all special places, to the world in its entirety. The universal goal must be balance between the true needs of a stabilized humankind and sustaining natural systems. But there is nothing balanced about the current assault on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. In the present prodigal temper, industrial invasion would simply waste the refuge's oil. It would *define* the ephemeral, the primitive, the socially useless.

Let's hold on to this place. Let it stand for its own sake. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge should be a marker, a symbolic turning point in the human condition, not a sacked industrial wasteland.

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