

Scholars for the Arctic Refuge

November 29, 2017



Porcupine River caribou migrating to the coastal plain for calving, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Photograph by Subhankar Banerjee, 2002

Open Letter to Members of the United States Congress:

In the next few weeks, the US Congress will decide whether or not to mandate oil and gas drilling in the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as part of the 2018 federal budget bill. The Arctic Refuge may seem far away to many, but its ecosystems sustain a diverse array of species that matter to Americans and to people around the world. Opening this refuge to fossil fuel development would ignore the will of the American people, who have for decades urged their elected officials to protect this irreplaceable ecological treasure. It would also violate human rights and jeopardize the food security of the indigenous Gwich'in people of the US and Canada. We are scholars from a wide range of fields—including the humanities, the social sciences, the sciences, the arts, and other areas—united in our belief that drilling in the Arctic Refuge would be a grave mistake. We call upon Congress to remove this reckless provision from the budget.

There is no justification for using the budget process to push through oil development in the Arctic Refuge. Drilling proponents claim lease sales will generate 1 billion dollars in revenue over the next decade to help defray the 1.5 trillion dollars of proposed tax cuts for corporations and the rich. Even if the anticipated revenue figure turned out to be correct (many estimates predict a far lower amount), it still represents an incredibly minute fraction of the tax-cut proposal. This abuse of the budget process would sacrifice one of the nation's most ecologically and culturally significant places for a paltry sum of federal revenue.

As the ecological heart of the Arctic Refuge, the coastal plain provides critical calving and nursing habitat for the Porcupine caribou herd. Almost 200,000 caribou embark every year on the longest land migration of any animal on earth, journeying from the taiga and boreal forest ecosystems of northeast Alaska and the adjacent northwest Canada to the coastal plain, where they calve and nurse their young. Caribou biologists have repeatedly warned that oil development would have catastrophic effects on the herd. In addition to nurturing caribou, the coastal plain provides nesting and feeding habitat for millions of migratory birds. Nearly two hundred different species travel from all fifty states and six continents to breed and find

nourishment in the Arctic Refuge. The coastal plain also offers the most important on-shore denning habitat in the US Arctic for polar bears, now listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. As we are in the midst of what scientists call the earth's sixth mass extinction, the vast nursery of the coastal plain needs protection now more than ever.

For Gwich'in communities on both sides of the US-Canada border, the prospect of drilling represents an existential threat to their cultural survival. The Gwich'in have relied upon the Porcupine caribou herd for nutritional, cultural, and spiritual sustenance for millennia. To them, the coastal plain is "The Sacred Place Where Life Begins."

Drilling in the Arctic is risky—the inevitable and chronic spills of oil and other toxic substances onto the fragile tundra would scar this land and disrupt its wildlife. The pollution caused by the sprawling infrastructure of oil development would threaten wildlife populations and harm indigenous communities that rely on the biotic life. Moreover, as the effects of climate change become more apparent, and as the global community continues to move away from fossil fuels toward renewable energy, why would we now destroy the crown jewel of our National Wildlife Refuge System?

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge must not be auctioned off to Big Oil. Its natural values far exceed any oil that may lie beneath the coastal plain. As scholars from across the United States and Canada, we ask that you keep this cherished place and vibrant ecosystem protected for generations to come.

Sincerely,

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