The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: No place for oil development

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In this paper, I will argue that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) of northeastern Alaska should not be opened for the exploitation of its underground oil reserves. Sobering realities of the U.S.'s disproportionate fuel consumption and dwindling nonrenewable natural resources have provoked many to question how such an excessively consumptive lifestyle can continue. Amidst rising geopolitical turmoil has surfaced the sensitive question, "America's energy challenge" as it's known to the Bush Administration, of where future generations' energy will come from (NEPDG, 2001). Some feel that the answer is to simply increase domestic production, and if that means drilling in areas previously protected from oil development then so be it. In 2001, President Bush's National Energy Policy Development Group (NEPDG), stated in its report (2001) that ANWR's coastal plain is "the single most promising prospect in the United States" (p.5-9). Although this may be true, the presidential administration's idea of drilling its way to energy independence is destined for environmental genocide and failure. If the U.S. Government stubbornly insists, though, its efforts will unravel much like its campaign of bombing the world free of terrorism: counter-productive and self-destructive. Although it's not easy to hear, believe, or accept, the answer to "America's energy challenge" will not come in the form of more oil. In how we respond to this reality, revealed by incorporating common sense, rests the fate of our civilization. If it's energy security that is the ultimate goal, energy from a reliable source, which can be passed on to future generations, then nothing could be more regressive to achieving energy independence than opening ANWR's coastal plain to oil drilling. Proponents of opening ANWR to oil development are convinced that the region's underlying oil reserves are an ultimate elixir that would help make the U.S. energy independent (Coon, 2001). President Bush himself has stated that drilling in ANWR would "have helped America become less dependent on foreign sources of energy" (Levine, 2004, para. 4). The President's NEPDG (2001), headed by Vice President Dick Cheney, suggests that, to make the U.S. less dependent on energy imports from regions like the Persian Gulf, domestic fossil fuel supplies need to be increased.

Opening ANWR to drilling would have many consequences. Achieving independence from the very resource being extracted from beneath the tundra, however, would not be one of them. Instead, if oil development of ANWR is permitted, the U.S.'s reliance upon nonrenewable resources would only be reinforced. It takes great delusion to suggest a growing independence from these fossil fuels when their production and consumption are increasing concurrently. A less obvious, but inevitable, byproduct of ANWR development would be the persistence of U.S.'s invasive presence in world regions fortunate enough to overlay black gold. Since over two thirds of the Earth's dwindling oil reserves remain in the Middle East, choosing to develop ANWR and reinforce its oil addiction, the U.S. actually extends its tenure as dictator to a region of great unrest whose residents have, put lightly, warranted animosity towards the U.S.'s exploitative squatting (NEPDG, 2001). Not until alternative, renewable, and more efficient energy sources are adopted can the U.S. actually hope for energy independence. That the U.S. Government hasn't already applied such renewable sources exhibits willful negligence. The technologies already exist to harness energy from readily available renewable sources such as solar, wind, geothermal, and biomass. Their development, though, is sadly inhibited because their energies are less lucrative to oil companies with political power.

Drilling proponents commonly emphasize space relativity as reason enough for drilling in the refuge (Arctic Power, 2005; Murkowski, 2004; Coon, 2001). Arctic Power's website (2005) proclaims that merely 1.5 million acres (8%) of ANWR would be opened to oil drilling. These by no means miniscule 1.5 million acres prospected for oil development is ANWR's entire coastal plain which has been protected from overexploitative practices for a reason (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2001; NRDC: Life, 2005; Alaska Wilderness League, 2005). Although drilling proponents commonly undermine the vitality of ANWR's coastal plain, framing the area as an ugly environment
inhabited only by mosquitoes, unworthy of conservation, and fit only for resource extraction (Coon, 2001; Murkowski, 2004), ANWR’s coastal plain is the biological heart of the entire refuge which happens to house the calving grounds of 129,000 Porcupine Caribou every summer (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2001). According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2001), the coastal plain is also a rookery to over one hundred migratory bird species that, in the summer months, often comprise over 300,000 individuals. Nearly half of the remaining heavily threatened Beaufort Sea polar bear, the largest carnivore on Earth, den within ANWR’s coastal plain (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2001). Muskoxen, grizzly bear, wolverine, artic fox, and wolf also inhabit the coastal plain of ANWR (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2001). Such a remarkable biodiversity should not become trammeled and exploited for short-term economic gain.

After dismissing ANWR’s coastal plain as an ugly environment, which one conservative editor dubbed “godforsaken” (Coon, 2001, p. 2), drilling proponents submit that the polar bears, caribou, and whatever other life there exists in the desolate hellscape, known as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, would go unharmed to all degrees of oil production introduced because modern technology leaves no ecological footprint (Peltier, 2004; Murkowski, 2004). The United States Geological Survey, however, has described ANWR’s underlying oil reverses as sporadically concentrated and thus, despite modern technology, efficient extraction from a single island complex would be impossible (NRDC: Wilderness, 2004). Instead, several intrusive wells are needed which would divide, disturb, and destroy huge expanses of pristine arctic tundra habitat. Perhaps a less sugar-coated picture of things to come for ANWR’s coastal plain might be gathered by looking just 60 miles west to Prudhoe Bay’s industrial monstrosity where 1,500 miles of roads and pipelines weave between 1,400 oil wells collectively emitting over double the pollutant discharge of Washington D.C. (NRDC: Impact, 2004).

When discussing the potential economic returns from oil development drilling proponents consistently boast the best possible scenarios from the coastal plain’s geological surveys. President Bush’s National Energy Policy (2001) proclaims that ANWR’s coastal plain is capable of “production [that] could equal 46 years of current oil imports from Iraq” (p.5-9). In a letter to Vanity Fair last spring, Alaska Senator, Lisa Murkowski (2004) stated that “an area that is only slightly larger than the mall between the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial...could produce up to 16 billion barrels of oil” (para. 4). Behind the hypothetical figures, however, nothing is guaranteed. The rhetoric of these drilling proponents can only be affirmed if oil recoveries given less than a 5% likelihood by the USGS are achieved; there remains only a 50% chance of recovering even 5.3 billion barrels of oil from ANWR’s coastal plain (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2001). Even if 5.3 billion barrels of oil are recovered, considering the U.S.’s consumption of 20 million barrels of oil each day, ANWR’s coastal plain would provide only enough to supply the U.S. for nine months at best (EIA, 2005; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2001). In making her case for drilling the refuge, Senator Murkowski (2004) makes note of Alaska’s near perfect history of oil production which, according to her, shows that “we can respect the land and produce oil at the same time” (para. 5). Besides, Murkowski (2004) adds, “little adverse impact on the environment and wildlife” has taken place in the state thus far (para. 5). Here, Senator Murkowski is absolutely right if you disqualify the average one oil spill a day from Alaska’s numerous oil fields on its North Slope and the Trans-Alaska Pipeline and, of course, there was Exxon Valdez disaster which devastated Prince William Sound and many of its fisheries irreparably (NRDC: Impact, 2005).

Perhaps at greatest risk to ANWR development is a potential adverse impact to the region’s Porcupine Caribou herd which has been an essential food source to indigenous subsistence communities of the region for generations (Gwich’in Steering Committee, 2004). A disturbance to the traditional food sources of the Athabascan Gwich’in people and the Inupiat natives of Kaktovik threatens their entire livelihood. Any short-term economic benefits that oil development may bring to these people will be worthless if it ends up harming, or even altering the migration routes of the Porcupine Caribou population which the Gwich’in intentionally established their villages around (Gwich’in Steering Committee, 2004). Once ANWR’s pump is empty the neighboring indigenous communities will never again receive money from the oil development. Once the oil’s gone, these natives will have no choice but to fall back on their traditional lifestyle assuming ANWR’s development hasn’t made this impossible by harming their staple subsistence food source. Jonathon Solomon, Chairman of the Gwich’in Steering Committee, believes that “the future of the Gwich’in and the future of the Caribou are the same” (Gwich’in Steering Committee, 2004).

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay has ominously stated that if oil drilling were permitted in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve it “would crack the backs of radical environmentalists” (Watson & Kenworthy, 2004, p. 1). A pro-ANWR development decision, it’s feared, could trigger a snowball effect where
Congressman DeLay and other proponents would work towards trammeling more protected fragile environments for quick profits (Defenders' Environmental Network, 2003). This is why the line must be drawn now. It's being perpetuated that ANWR's underlying oil is the Holy Grail, the key to energy independence, that if not opened for development will undermine America's war on terrorism (CFIF, 2002). None of this is true. We cannot sit back and let a rampage of oil development through our country's few remaining protected wildernesses initiate in the name of delusional “national energy security” (NEPDG, 2001, p.8-1). ANWR doesn't have to be opened for oil development.

Fortunately, there is an alternative. If the U.S.'s self-destructive oil addiction were looked at seriously and common sense was lifted above the mindless partisan squabbling that has fallen to the bullying of oil companies the U.S. demand for oil could be greatly reduced; so much so that ANWR wouldn't even have to be considered for drilling (NRDC: Wilderness, 2005). A long overdue application of alternative renewable energy sources, which are cleaner and more efficient, by the U.S. would break its reckless habit of prioritizing short-term gain over long-term pain where anthropocentric negligence dictates the fate of entire species. Technologies already exist to make modern automobiles far more fuel efficient than their current levels. That they aren't inherently made to be as efficient as possible is revealing of oil companies' range of influence. It'd be far more practical if available technologies were applied to use less fuel rather than producing and consuming even more. We can see where the road of increased production and consumption is heading. Efficiency and conservation is the only route which can leave alone, rather than “save”, ANWR from pillaging for what we now know to be nothing more than, greed.

Since the hands of the federal government have gone unchanged it is likely that, for the first time since it was voted down in April of 2002, whether to drill for oil in what former Secretary of Interior Seaton called “one of our remaining wildlife and wilderness frontiers”, will again be voted on as soon as this coming spring (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2001). ANWR's narrow coastal plain is the only area on Alaska's entire North Slope not open to oil development (NRDC: Life, 2005). The line must be drawn.

Our civilization has accomplished many things but is naive in thinking its production methods can recreate anything. We may be able to split the atom, go to the moon, develop immunizations, and build metal structures that stretch into the sky but our ingenuity is helpless when it comes to producing wilderness. Wilderness cannot be created; once it's gone, it's gone forever. Second chances don't exist when dealing with such fragile environments virgin to exploitative practices which irreparably compromise an environment's serenity first and foremost. No invention of our civilization will ever change that. It's that which we cannot create, therefore, which should be given the deepest consideration before making decisions which threaten the serenity of the Earth's few remaining wilderesses. Drilling in ANWR may fill up the tank for nine months, a year maybe. Years from now, though, if the coastal plain has become a juggernaut conglomeration of roads, pipelines, and oil wells, we cannot act puzzled when confronted with a displaced caribou herd of dwindling numbers, the extinction of the polar bear, an oil slicked Beaufort Sea, and disintegrated indigenous communities in the battered skeleton of what was once an environment known to rival the African Serengeti (NRDC: Life, 2005; Alaska Wilderness League, 2004). We cannot afford to wait until this day comes to ponder if it would be profitable to conserve half of the denning area of Earth's largest terrestrial carnivore, the calving grounds of 130,000 caribou, the rookery of 300,000 migratory birds, which is the heart of America's last remaining arctic wilderness.

Editor's Note: This is a position paper written for English 215.

REFERENCES


