

THE LAST GREAT PLACE

BY JONATHAN WATERMAN

DEVOTED 20 YEARS TO MOUNTAINEERING EXPEDITIONS around the world until discovering that the Far North held the solo of my dreams: sea kayaking the famed Northwest Passage. It was a different sort of expedition than going to the Himalaya or Cordillera, but adventuring alone amid the Arctic's polar bears, swarming mosquitoes and sea ice offered better survival odds than unroping at high altitude amid crevasses, avalanches and seracs. More importantly, I was able to get to know Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—setting for the most epic wilderness battle of our time. During the last 25 years that the nation has debated developing its northernmost 1.5 million acres for oil, the region has become America's symbolic wilderness temple: defile this place, then nothing will be sacred.

A CLIMBER'S DREAMLAND OF SNOWY, MOSTLY UNCLIMBED MOUNTAINS, BOOMING UP DIRECTLY FROM THE SEA

As I set off alone in a sea kayak to cross 2,000 miles of Arctic wilderness, I thought of all that surrounded me. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a climber's dreamland of snowy, mostly unclimbed mountains, booming up directly from the sea, surrounded by sandy spits, lush lagoons and a polygon-patterned coastal plain. It is one of those rare places where we can escape the press of crowds and embrace the privilege of being swallowed alive by mountains... or the area's iconic polar bears. Yet these liberating ideals would be quashed by the development proposal: a labyrinth of roads and pipelines that would take a half-century of drilling to extract a paltry year's worth of U.S. oil. If Congress approves the oil drilling, it will destroy the remote, 1.5 million acre, biological heart of the Refuge and all the logic behind its original creation.

In 1960, the Eisenhower administration created the nine million acre Arctic National Wildlife Range to protect its "unique wildlife, wilderness and recreation values," including its 35 land mammals, nine marine

mammals, 180 bird species and mind-boggling array of shining basins, rolling hills and unnamed peaks. The Range stretched north from forested valleys across the glaciated mountains to the coastal plain of the Beaufort Sea, a vital calving and protein stop for the 123,000-strong Porcupine Caribou herd. In 1980, the Carter administration expanded the Range into a 19.2 million acre Refuge. Congress mandated a study of 1.5 million acres of the Refuge's coastal plain to determine if it should be opened for oil development or remain as protected wilderness. Several years later, Congress learned from the study that the Refuge contained a lot of oil but also even more wildlife than initially thought. Since then, legislation to open the region to oil drilling has been repeatedly defeated.

But now, with a changing Congress, conservationists are more motivated than ever to move from defense to offense. For the first time in a decade, both houses of Congress have introduced bipartisan wilderness bills that would shut down future oil development in the Refuge and uphold the original environmental vision of the area.

Yes, there are thousands of miles of wilderness in the Arctic, but after having paddled it's coastline I intimately understood the uniqueness, the environmental importance of the Refugee—it's a garden, incomparably rich with flora and fauna, the greatest wealth of polar bear dens found in Alaska and the finest displays of geography spanning the Arctic. This last pristine corner of Alaska is oddly unscarred by the most recent ice age, sequestered in summer lushness and inhabited by millions of migratory animals—all poised to flee forever at the first tendrils of human industry. How can we not protect it?

Jonathan Waterman is the author of Where Mountains Are Nameless; Passion and Politics in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. To learn more about the importance of the Refuge and what you can do to help save it from oil development, go to www.alaskawild.org/take-action.


The pristine Kongakut River in the Brooks Range of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, AK.  JOHN BURCHAM



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