

America's Arctic

* Arctic National Wildlife Refuge * National Petroleum Reserve—Alaska * Arctic Ocean *



Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

* The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one of the last unspoiled wilderness places left in America. The Refuge's 1.5 million acre coastal plain contains critical habitat for 250 species of wildlife – including caribou, polar bears, grizzly bears and migrating birds. The Porcupine Caribou Herd, which depends on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge for calving and nursery of its offspring, has sustained the people of the Gwich'in Nation for more than 20,000 years.

* Drilling in the Arctic Refuge would contribute little to America's long-term energy needs. At best, speculative oil from the Refuge might lower gas prices by a few cents per gallon 10 years from now. But drilling in the Refuge would permanently destroy one of our nation's greatest ecosystems. It also would exacerbate the effects of climate change in an area that is already bearing the stresses of our changing planet like nowhere else on Earth.

* For nearly half a century, millions of Americans have fought passionately to protect this wilderness icon. In order to ensure that the Arctic Refuge remains untouched for future generations, it must be granted the strongest legislative protections possible. Legislation has been introduced in the U.S. House (H.R. 39) and Senate (S. 231) that would preserve the Arctic Refuge coastal plain by designating it as wilderness once and for all. This legislation will not only ensure that one of our nation's last wild, untouched places will be preserved for future generations, it also will provide support for our nation's new, clean energy future.

The Reserve

* The lands and waters of the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (Reserve) comprise some of our nation's most vital natural habitat. Spanning 23.5 million acres across the western North Slope of Alaska, the Reserve is the largest single unit of public lands in the nation. It is made up of millions of acres of wilderness-quality lands with critical habitat for migratory birds, grizzly bears, caribou, polar bears, walrus, beluga whales and more. The North Slope communities that maintain a subsistence culture depend on these living resources to survive. Oil and gas activities have a place in the Reserve, but its most special places must be kept off limits through legislative protections.

* The Department of Interior (DOI) has designated four “Special Areas” in the Reserve that are particularly important for their subsistence, wildlife and other natural values. The Teshekpuk Lake Special Area is the most significant goose molting area in the circumpolar Arctic and is home to the 45,000-animal Teshekpuk Lake Caribou Herd. The Colville River, Utukok River Uplands, and Kasegaluk Lagoon Special Areas are critical habitats for the highest density of nesting birds of prey in the world, the nation’s largest caribou herd and 3,000 beluga whales.

* Although the DOI is supposed to provide “maximum protection” within the Reserve’s Special Areas, there is no real lasting protection for these areas. During its time in office, the Bush administration disregarded advice from scientists, overwhelming public opposition, and historic protections to pull out all the stops to open almost the entire Reserve for oil and gas development. Legislation will soon be introduced that will protect the Teshekpuk Lake area and call for a timeout on development in other key areas in order to study the effects of climate change and oil and gas activities on the wildlife and resources of these important wilderness-quality lands.

Arctic Ocean

* The 78 million acres of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas that make up the Arctic Ocean are part of one of the most unique marine ecosystems in the world. Many of America’s most beloved sea animals live in these waters, including the entire population of U.S. polar bears recently designated as threatened. Whales, sea otters, walrus, sea lions and countless birds also thrive there and support our nation’s oldest subsistence traditions.

* Due to its remote location and harsh weather conditions, the Arctic Ocean is the least studied and most poorly understood area in the world. Thus little is known about the effects of a recently-proposed massive oil and gas program on this unique ecosystem. The government’s Mineral Management Service has predicted a 33 to 50 percent likelihood of a “major oil spill” in these waters, while acknowledging that the technology needed to clean up such a spill does not exist. At the same time, the Arctic is suffering from the effects of climate change at unmatched rates. The polar bear’s Arctic sea ice habitat is melting rapidly and experts believe the polar bear may be extinct by 2050. Any oil extracted from new development in the Arctic Ocean would only add to the effects of climate change already causing such stress.

* Nevertheless, in two different long-term offshore oil and gas development plans for the nation, the Bush administration decided to move forward quickly to open almost all of America’s Arctic Ocean to massive oil and gas development. Legislation will be introduced soon to halt any new oil and gas activities in America’s Arctic until the effects of climate change and industrial development can truly be assessed.



Photos courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



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