

S. 231 Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Wilderness Bill

Lasting Protections

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one of the last pristine, untouched wilderness places left in America. President Eisenhower began the bipartisan legacy of protecting this area for future generations nearly a half century ago when he set aside 8.9 million acres as the Arctic National Wildlife Range in 1960.

In 1980, President Carter continued this legacy by expanding the area, designating much of the land as protected Wilderness, and renaming it the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Wilderness designation provides strong protection from oil development and other harmful activities.



However, part of the Refuge - the 1.5 million-acre Coastal Plain, known as its biological heart - was **not** protected as Wilderness. To extend this protection to the coastal plain, Senator Joe Lieberman (ID-CT) introduced S. 231, a bill to “designate a portion of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as wilderness.”

Unparalleled Wilderness

The 19.6 million-acre Refuge is a spectacular wildland of boreal forests, rugged mountains, sweeping tundra vistas, wild rivers, coastal lagoons and barrier islands. Located in the northeastern corner of Alaska, the Refuge is most unique for that fact that it encompasses an unbroken continuum of arctic and subarctic ecosystems that includes a vast array of extraordinary wildlife. It is a place so wild that there is no sign of human life for hundreds of miles.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has called the Coastal Plain “the center for wildlife activity” for the entire Refuge. There is no greater place in America to experience wild nature - to hike, fish, hunt, raft or camp. The Coastal Plain is also the epicenter of the drilling debate. Unfortunately, throughout its history, oil companies and their allies in the White House and Congress have lobbied hard to open the biological heart of the Refuge to drilling.

Indigenous People

The way of life and culture of the Gwich'in people have been dependant on the Porcupine Caribou Herd for centuries. Each year, the herd travels hundreds of miles to the Coastal Plain to birth and nurse their young. For the caribou, there is no alternative to this vital and sensitive habitat that they have depended on for millennia. The herd's migration and calving is a spectacle reminiscent of the Serengeti's wildebeest and of the buffalo herds that once thundered across the Great Plains. The Gwich'in, who refer to the Coastal Plain as the “Sacred Place Where Life Begins,” adamantly oppose drilling in the area and strongly support Wilderness protection. Designating the Coastal Plain of the Refuge as Wilderness would not only ensure the protection one of the last remaining great American wilderness areas, but also this vital native culture.

Polar Bears and Other Wildlife

Polar bear habitat is threatened by the effects of global warming and oil development. Now more than ever the bears depend on the Coastal Plain of the Refuge to survive. The Coastal Plain is the most significant onshore polar bear denning habitat in the U.S.—an increasingly important distinction as researchers confirm that global warming is significantly reducing offshore ice flows, polar bear's preferred denning habitat.

Recently, unusually large numbers of the bears have been gathering along the Refuge's beaches, often huddled around whale carcasses. Development in the Refuge would further compound the polar bear's problems. Denning polar bears are extremely sensitive to industrial activity. Females may abandon their dens if disturbed, which is usually fatal for cubs unable to fend for themselves.

The Refuge provides vital habitat for this and more of America's most spectacular wildlife. All three species of bears, caribou, wolves, and muskoxen are just a few of the more than 250 species that rely on the Coastal Plain to thrive and survive. Millions of birds, representing some 180 species, migrate to the Coastal Plain to nest, rear their young, molt, and feed. Birds from all 50 states and six of the seven continents migrate to the Refuge for summer.

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