

Teshekpuk Lake and the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska

The National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (Reserve) is the largest single unit of public lands in the nation. Encompassing 23.5 million acres, the Reserve harbors rich and vital wild lands and wildlife, important in their own right and to the Inupiat people of Alaska's North Slope for their subsistence culture. President Harding established the Naval Petroleum Reserve-Alaska in 1923. Congress transferred management of the Reserve from the Navy to the Interior Department in 1976, and required the Secretary of Interior to provide "maximum protection" for the Reserve's critical biological and cultural resources.

Teshekpuk Lake

Teshekpuk Lake is located on Alaska's North Slope, within the Reserve. The Lake and its surrounding wetlands are ecologically unique and one of the most important wildlife habitats in the circumpolar Arctic. For years, conservationists, Alaskan Natives, sportsmen, and wildlife management organizations have been successfully fighting efforts to open this vital habitat to destructive oil and gas development.

Tens of thousands of geese migrate from the United States, Canada, and Mexico to use this remote wetland habitat to molt. During molting flightless geese are highly vulnerable to any disturbance and industrial development could reduce geese populations important all of North America.

Mammals including gray wolves, grizzly bears, polar bears, and the 45,000 animal Teshekpuk Lake caribou herd all thrive in this area. The Teshekpuk Lake area is important for subsistence hunting and fishing to residents of several North Slope Native villages, including Barrow and Nuiqsut. Oil and gas development poses serious health threats to the surrounding communities and populations of wildlife which are important to Alaska Natives and their traditional way of life. Numerous sites considered sacred to the Inupiat people are near Teshekpuk Lake.

Current Status

In May of 2008 the Bureau of Land Management released the Final Environmental Impact Statement for a new management plan for the Northeastern Planning Area of the Reserve where Teshekpuk Lake is located. This plan had been the administrative vehicle through which BLM has been trying open the previously protected Teshekpuk Lake habitat to oil and gas development. Thanks to overwhelming public support the new plan puts off oil and gas development in the vital wetland habitat around the Lake until 2018. While temporary protection was an important victory, permanent protection is needed. Permanent protection will only come through an act of Congress.



Other Priority Conservation Areas in the Reserve

In addition to Teshekpuk Lake, other conservation priority areas that have significant biological and cultural sensitivity and importance include:

Utukok River Uplands - This lush area includes critical calving areas and other habitats for the 450,000 animal Western Arctic caribou herd utilized by 40 villages for subsistence throughout Western Alaska.

Colville River - The cliffs along the Colville River provide critical nesting sites and adjacent hunting areas for peregrine and gyrfalcons, golden eagles, and rough-legged hawks; two tributaries, the Kikiakrorak and Kogosukruk Rivers also possess outstanding wildlife values.

Kasegluk Lagoon - A unique barrier island ecosystem within and adjacent to the Reserve along the Chukchi Sea coast, this area has high marine mammal, fish, waterfowl and other wildlife values. These resources are heavily relied on by local subsistence users. Up to 3,500 beluga whales gather in the area to feed and bear their young. The area is also used by grizzly and polar bears.

Dease Inlet-Meade River - The wetlands found here are key habitats for waterfowl, loons, and shorebirds. Yellow-billed and red-throated loons, brant, white-fronted geese, king eider, and the threatened spectacled eider nest in high densities. Spotted seals have an important haul out area, and polar bears den along the outer shores.

Peard Bay- These wetlands provide important shorebird and waterfowl habitat including high nesting densities of spectacled eiders. It is also an important polar bear denning area.

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