

The Gwich'in and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

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In 1997, I joined a small group engaged in a rafting trip in Alaska from the southern portion of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the shore of the Beaufort Sea (Arctic Ocean). The latter portion of this trip includes the coastal plain, a remarkable, lush vegetative zone which happens to be under consideration by those who would open Alaska lands to oil exploration and possible development. As a visitor to this magnificent region of Alaska, I can attest to the peaceful beauty of the

refuge with particular emphasis on high elevation vistas overlooking the coastal plain to the north and magnificent mountain views to the south. The refuge itself constitutes a homeland for a large number of wildlife species plus serving as a critical nesting place for a wide variety of migratory birds. The Act, which created an expanded Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in 1980, requires that an act of Congress is necessary if oil exploration and development are to take place.

In addition to the rafting portion of my trip, I spent two and a half days living with the

indigenous people who live just south of the refuge in a place called Arctic Village. They call themselves the "Gwich'in." They and their ancestors have lived here for thousands of years. In concern for their future, they believe that they would be negatively impacted by oil discovery and extraction within the refuge. They are the caribou people. Their lives are intricately linked with migratory caribou herds, which each year visit the refuge from their winter home on the Porcupine River in Canada to the coastal plain region of the refuge in Alaska.

The Gwich'in are

aware of the worldwide need for oil, beginning with exploration, but this is their homeland. They are not trophy hunters; rather they are subsistence users. They depend upon migratory caribou for subsistence and as a source for implements and clothing, which are fashioned from the skin and bones of caribou. Any disruption in the long established habits of caribou to migrate to the coastal plain, seeking nourishment and a safe environment in which to give birth to their calves, could bring about a major change in the long established life and cus-

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE A4)

toms of the Gwich'in people.

The Gwich'in wish to live their lives in peace in their ancient homeland. I firmly believe they deserve that support from the people of our nation. Yes, I too drive a car. Yes, I too am aware of the importance of oil by which to "fuel" the energy needs of the people of the United States. But I also know about certain diminishing national wonders, which need protection if they are to continue to inspire and enrich us!