

ALASKA WILDERNESS LEAGUE * NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY * NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION * SIERRA CLUB

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: December 7, 2009

CONTACTS: Emilie Surrusco, Alaska Wilderness League, 202-544-5205
Taldi Walter, National Audubon Society, 907-276-7034
Desirée Sorenson-Groves National Wildlife Refuge Association, 202-292-3961
Dan Ritzman, Sierra Club, 907-276-4044

Arctic Refuge 50th Anniversary Celebration Begins Today

A yearlong celebration of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge launches today to recognize the importance of this special place in our nation's natural history. Conservation groups, indigenous communities, members of Congress and millions of Americans who identify the Arctic Refuge as one of our nation's top natural icons will take part in a series of events over the next year leading up to Dec. 6, 2010, the 50th anniversary of the designation of the Arctic Refuge - which was set aside to preserve its "unique wildlife, wilderness and recreational values."

The first of the 50th anniversary celebrations will be held on January 13th with a press event in Washington, D.C. where descendants of the original heroes of the Arctic Refuge will call on all Americans to protect this iconic place for future generations.

"For the past 50 years, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, America's last great wilderness, has stood as a testament to our nation's wilderness spirit," said Cindy Shogan, executive director of the Alaska Wilderness League, founded in 1993 to protect the Arctic Refuge from oil drilling. "Wilderness visionary Margaret Murie said it best: 'The Arctic Refuge stands as the commitment of the past generations to all succeeding generations - that America's finest example of the world we did not alter or control will be passed on, undiminished.'"

The Arctic Refuge was first created 50 years ago when President Dwight Eisenhower set aside 8.9 million acres as the Arctic National Wildlife Range. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter enlarged the size of the Range to 18 million acres and renamed it the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Today, the Arctic Refuge continues to stand as our nation's finest example of intact, naturally functioning arctic/subarctic ecosystems. Such a broad spectrum of diverse habitats occurring within a single protected unit is unparalleled in North America, and likely the entire circumpolar north.

"The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and its magnificent wilderness and wildlife, are the embodiment of America's 150-million-acre Refuge System," said Evan Hirsche, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. "To celebrate the Arctic's 50th anniversary is to celebrate a legacy for future generations started by President Theodore Roosevelt more than 100 years ago."

While the majority of the Arctic Refuge was designated as wilderness, the 1.5 million acre coastal plain - also known as the Refuge's biological heart - was left out. Years later, the status of the Arctic Refuge's coastal plain is still threatened by oil development, despite the fact that government studies have found that the amount of oil speculated to be available in the coastal plain would amount to, at most, 1.2 percent of total world oil consumption in 2030.

The Arctic Refuge's coastal plain provides habitat essential for the survival of 180 species of birds as well as for numerous mammals - including caribou, musk oxen, wolves, wolverines, moose, Arctic and red

foxes, black bears, brown bears and Dall sheep. The importance of this area to polar bears was also recently emphasized by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service when it proposed much of the coastal plain of the Refuge as critical habitat for the polar bear.

Additionally, for the past 50 years, the coastal plain has been the most frequently used birthing and nursery grounds for the migratory Porcupine Caribou Herd. This caribou herd has been part of the social, economic and spiritual fabric of the lives of the Gwich'in people for thousands of years. The Gwich'in call the coastal plain "Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit" or "The Sacred Place Where Life Begins."

"The Arctic Refuge's rolling tundra and wild rivers, wetlands, ponds, deep lakes and sparkling coastal waters are home to a stunning array of wildlife. Every year nearly 200 species of birds visit, and nest on, the region's tundra and wetlands - while caribou, muskoxen, wolverines, grizzly, and polar bears roam the vast expanse of land and walrus, bowhead and beluga whales ply the Arctic waters," said Dan Ritzman Alaska Program Director for the Sierra Club. **"Now, all across their Arctic home, rapid climate change is altering their fragile habitat and the push to drill for oil is mounting. We must use this golden anniversary to step up our efforts to ensure that the biological heart of the Refuge, its coastal plain, is protected and held in trust for future generations."**