

A Brief History of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Background

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the largest unit in the National Wildlife Refuge System, comprising 19.6 million acres of wild lands.

The fight to protect this area was launched by a group of visionary conservationists, led by Olaus and Margaret Murie, who campaigned to establish the nation's first ecosystem-scale conservation area. On December 6, 1960, President Eisenhower made their vision a reality by establishing the 8.9-million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Range specifically for its "unique wildlife, wilderness, and recreational values." 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. However, the 1.5-million-acre Coastal Plain, the biological heart of the Refuge, was left unprotected. Congress and the administration should take steps to secure the strongest protections possible for this iconic landscape.

More than 250 animal species rely on the Arctic Refuge's diverse habitats, including wolves, muskoxen, wolverines and caribou. Numerous species of birds rely on the Arctic Refuge during the summer months before migrating to every state in the U.S. and across six continents.

Female polar bears build dens in the Arctic Refuge to give birth to their young. These dens are primarily found in the Coastal Plain. Though polar bears prefer to spend the majority of their time on the drifting pack ice in the Arctic Ocean, the sea ice is receding due to global warming, making land denning sites in the Arctic Refuge increasingly important for polar bears.



According to oral tradition, for thousands of years the resources of the Arctic Refuge, especially the Porcupine Caribou herd, have sustained the Gwich'in people. Each spring, the herd makes a 1,400-mile commute north to their calving areas in the Coastal Plain to give birth. During the winter the herd disperses throughout the southern part of the Refuge and into Canada. It is estimated that an individual caribou may travel more than 3,000 miles over the course of a single year. Protecting the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou herd in the Arctic Refuge is crucial to protecting the culture of the Gwich'in people.

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Every national wildlife refuge across the United States has a regularly updated Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). These plans guide long-term management of the refuges. In January 2015, President Obama released a new Arctic National Wildlife Refuge CCP, nearly three decades after the last CCP was signed into effect in 1988.

This CCP included additional Wilderness recommendations for areas of the Refuge, including the Coastal Plain -- reversing the administration position on record set in place during President Reagan's administration, which recommended opening the Coastal Plain to oil drilling.

Since its creation, support for the Arctic Refuge has been diverse and nationwide. During the public comment period for the CCP, the Fish and Wildlife Service received more than 1 million comments in support of Wilderness for the Arctic Refuge and in opposition to oil and gas exploration and development. Alaskans showed overwhelming support at public hearings and sent thousands of comments including from 100 businesses across Alaska. Furthermore, conservation, religious, tribal organizations and citizens from across the country have stood strong to protect this piece of America's Arctic coast.

A Wilderness designation will help ensure that the invaluable lands and waters that make up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge are preserved for the long-term.

Political History

Starting in 1986, a bill to protect the Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain as Wilderness has been introduced in every Congress. Support for the Refuge over the years has been bipartisan and members from both parties continue to come together to safeguard our natural heritage. However, efforts to open the Arctic Refuge to oil and gas drilling have been just as persistent, including attempts to force Arctic Refuge drilling onto a must-pass military funding bill during a time of war. Adamant Arctic Refuge supporters in Congress have beaten back numerous attempts to open the Arctic Refuge to development. To ensure permanent protection for the next generation and beyond, it is more important than ever for Congress to designate the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge as Wilderness.



Photo courtesy of Gary Braasch

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Timeline

