

# Reader View: Arctic Refuge, the Gwich'in and the budget fight

By Subhankar Banerjee | Posted: Saturday, May 20, 2017 7:00 pm

Members from the indigenous Gwich'in Nation from Arctic Alaska are traveling through the Southwest to ask people here to stand with them against oil drilling in their homeland — the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The Arctic Refuge harbors an incredible diversity of life, including birds that arrive there from New Mexico and all over the world for nesting and rearing their young and for feeding. The refuge also has sustained the Gwich'in people for millennia, and it is a special place near and dear to my heart.

But it is under threat. In the coming days, President Donald Trump will release his budget, and if history repeats itself, Arctic Refuge drilling will be in there. There are many reasons why this is a terrible idea.

When species are going extinct faster than any time in the Earth's history, leading to the sixth extinction, why would we allow oil drilling in an internationally significant biological conservation area?

Why would we allow oil drilling in a culturally significant area that the Gwich'in people call "The Sacred Place Where Life Begins," the birthing grounds for the Porcupine River Caribou Herd? The Gwich'in people depend on the caribou for nutritional, cultural and spiritual needs. Drilling in the refuge would be a violation of Gwich'in human rights.

Why would we allow drilling in a place the American public have come to know and care about? A recent Center for American Progress poll shows that two-thirds of Americans oppose drilling in the Arctic Refuge, and the majority of those, 52 percent, are "strongly opposed."

It's also reckless to drill in the Arctic when the region is warming at a rate of at least twice the global average, which affects us all, as the Arctic happens to be the integrator of Earth's climate systems.

Pro-drilling advocates say that we need the oil beneath the Arctic Refuge to ensure energy security. This is a lie. Oil prices have been at historic lows, and the U.S. has been exporting oil at a fast clip. Furthermore, if Congress tries to slip in language about opening the refuge to drilling through the budget reconciliation process, any revenue estimates are purely speculative and would provide little toward our nation's economic security. U.S. energy security depends not on drilling in the Arctic Refuge but on moving away from fossil fuels to cleaner and renewable sources of energy.

There has been a long history of Congress' backdoor attempts to drill the Arctic Refuge. It has been unsuccessfully proposed as part of the budget reconciliation process multiple times in the past, resulting

in a presidential veto in 1995 and a high-profile opposition effort by moderate Republicans in 2005 that led to its removal from that year's final bill.

I have spent a significant amount of time in the Arctic Refuge. My photographs and writing contributed to defeating every drilling proposals during the eight years of the George W. Bush administration. I am standing again in solidarity with the Gwich'in Nation and the environmental conservation community in protecting the refuge. On June 6, The University of New Mexico Art Museum will open an exhibition of my photographs and writing that will highlight the long struggle for conservation and environmental justice in the Arctic.

I thank Democratic Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich and Rep. Michelle Lujan Grisham, D-N.M., for co-sponsoring the bill to protect the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and ask that Reps. Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., and Steve Pearce, R-N.M., co-sponsor as well.

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