

## SUBHANKAR BANERJEE

By Peter Matthiessen

I was mildly astonished, in late 2001, when a young photographer from Calcutta rang up to invite me on a rafting expedition in Arctic Alaska in July of 2002. We would follow the Kongakut River northward in its descent from the Brooks Range and out across the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the Beaufort Sea. Since the Arctic Refuge—the earth’s last stronghold of the great North American fauna of the Pleistocene—was a remote region I’d longed to visit for fifty years, I accepted at once.

A scientist by profession but an artist at heart, Subhankar Banerjee, at age thirty-two, had quit a well-paid job in Seattle and set out to photograph North American wildlife, in particular the large Arctic mammals, which are better represented in the Arctic Refuge than in any region on earth. In March of 2001, with the coast locked hard in winter ice, he headed for the Inupiat Eskimo village at Kaktovik, on Barter Island, off the northwest corner of the Refuge, where he persuaded a local hunter named Robert Thompson to guide him by snowmobile into that fiercely cold white landscape. There he embarked on a series of remarkable photographic shoots of winter landscapes and wildlife, including the emergence from her snow den of a polar bear with cubs. Although many renowned photographers have been drawn to the Arctic wild, almost none had ventured out in the dead of winter. (As Robert Thompson later told me, “That young feller from tropical India was ready and willing to go out in weather when even us Eskimos would much rather stay home.”)

The following year, Banerjee made more visits, with Thompson as his guide and companion; one of these was our 2002 expedition to the Arctic Refuge. During the same period, as Banerjee’s knowledge grew, he embraced a new role as an activist for the protection of the native Inupiat and Athabaskan Gwich’in against the great incursion of and contamination by the fossil-fuel industry—a.k.a. Big Oil, which was already dangerously close to the Refuge in the oil and gas fields known as Prudhoe Bay, just a few miles west. A dedicated conservationist, Banerjee assembled a book about the Refuge<sup>1</sup> in which his superb photographs would be accompanied by the essays of naturalists, biologists, environmentalists, and others familiar with Alaska and committed to the same vital cause. As it turned out, I became one of those essayists.

A few years later, in 2006, I joined Subhankar on a second expedition (also sponsored and accompanied by a dedicated Seattle businessman, Tom Campion, and outfitted by Jim Campbell and Carol Kasza of Arctic Treks, in Fairbanks); this time, Tom, Jim, Subhankar, and I flew by bush plane from Cold Foot, on the southern slope of the Brooks Range, to the Ututok Plateau, on the remote northwestern slope, to observe the great caribou migration through the mountains. From the Ututok, we continued north and west to Point Lay, on the Chukchi Sea, to discuss local environmental problems with the Inupiat, and we returned there the following year (2007) to observe the annual subsistence hunt for the small white whales called beluga. A few months later, in October 2007, accompanied by our wives, we traveled to Brussels to speak at a UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) climate-change conference about Arctic warming and its impact on land and life.

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<sup>1</sup> *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Land and Life*. The Mountaineers Books, Seattle, 2003

Subhankar Banerjee and I have a strong bond rooted in the fact that much of our recent work is inspired by Alaska's threatened hunting peoples and the wildlife they depend on, whether on land or sea or on the disappearing ice. In addition to real admiration for the beauty of his photography and for his dedication, I feel true gratitude for the unfailing enthusiasm and generosity that he has brought to our fieldwork even under difficult conditions, in the shared hope and faith that we may yet produce another worthwhile Arctic book.

In the meantime, I urge everyone to enjoy the superb Banerjee exhibit at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, not only as photography but as an introduction to the urgent environmental problems that face the Alaskan Arctic and its Gwich'in and Inupiat Americans.

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**Peter Matthiessen** is a writer whose numerous works of fiction and non-fiction include, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, *Far Tortuga*, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, which was nominated for the National Book Award, and *The Snow Leopard*, which won it. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His novel *Shadow Country* will be published by The Random House Modern Library in 2008.

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