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Alaska: Oil's Ground Zero

A trip to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a confrontation with choices: to drill or to preserve one of the last wild places.

If you want somebody to fly you over the towering peaks of the Brooks Range and drop you onto the spongy tundra of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), Dirk Nickisch is your man. Dirk is a former rodeo rider and crop duster, a wiry fellow with sharp eyes and prickly whiskers, whom some in his home state of North Dakota have likened to a coyote. He meets clients at a gravel airstrip in a Gwichin Indian village just south of the range. Dressed in oily pants and a baseball cap, he kicks the tires on his 1952 single-prop de Havilland Beaver, shoulders the rear rudder back and forth to be sure it's still in working order and tells you, if you ask him, that he reckons his Pratt & Whitney engine has been overhauled "a few times." He doesn't have much time for people who stand around asking questions without making themselves useful, however. So he rolls four plastic barrels of fuel under the plane and puts you to work with a hose and a squeaky hand pump.

Nobody would mistake Dirk Nickisch for a tree hugger. But as he takes off and flies over the northern mountains of Alaska—into one of the last unspoiled wilderness areas of America—he explains (if you ask him) why he doesn't want multinational oil companies to explore and drill for oil in any part of the refuge. "I moved up here because it's the last place like this," he says, looking out the windscreen over the southern reaches of the 19 million-acre refuge. Then he nods toward the peeling plastic of the dashboard, where a black-and-white photo of his two kids is stuck among pinwheel gauges measuring altitude and direction. "My little boy was 3 months old when he first saw the caribou come through the coastal plain," he says. "I don't want to leave him and his kids a bunch of old oil wells and some empty promises."

Minutes later, with snow-streaked peaks a few hundred feet below us, the vintage engine starts to cough and sputter. Dirk turns a worn red handle to switch gas tanks, and adjusts the throttle. The engine finds its voice again, and from here on in, the ride is smooth. We cross the range and glide between the Sadlerochit Mountains to our left and the white sluice of a small glacier to our right, cushioning down toward a 1.5 million-acre plain that has, from above, the tawny, matted appearance of buffalo hide. "This is the wildest place left in Alaska," Dirk says after landing on a strip of knee-high willow shrubs near the

Jago River, “the wildest place left in the United States.” Then he climbs back in his Beaver and flies off, leaving me and three companions (two photographers and environmentalist Dan Ritzman) in a seemingly lonesome land, silent but for the wind and the rushing river—the sort of quintessentially Alaskan place that touristy T-shirts in Anchorage refer to as “the last frontier.”

America’s founding myths are largely about taming wild places. The frontier shaped the American character even as we shaped it, moving from the Allegheny Mountains to the Mississippi and onward to the Missouri, the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific. But the frontier is all but gone now, and what remains occupies a unique place in the American psyche. Alaska has the largest area of wilderness lands in the country by far—an area roughly the size of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland combined. Yet it also has the nation’s two largest oil fields, and is second only to Texas in proven reserves of crude. Alaskans use more energy per capita than any other people in the country, and scientists who study global warming say that no state is more affected by climatic change. As it is, average temperatures in Alaska have spiked close to 5 degrees since the 1960s, and the polar sea ice has thinned by 40 percent over the same period.

A trip to Alaska’s Arctic refuge is a confrontation with choices: should we drill or protect wilderness? Which do we value more: greater American oil production or a landscape largely untouched by the hand of man? In this debate, Alaska itself has taken on a symbolic heft beyond its value as a wilderness preserve or as a source of oil. Once again, the way Americans engage their frontier will reflect, in no small measure, the national character. Are we energy gluttons, or hopeless romantics wedded to a utopian vision of the natural world? Are we conservationists or materialists? In a country where most people support government conservation efforts, yet sales of gas-guzzling SUVs are soaring, some might argue that we’re simply a people who hope and believe that we can have it all.

Most Americans who want to protect the Arctic refuge will never see it, and there’s good reason for that. In February, when the sun hardly comes up, temperatures drop to an average of about 4 degrees below zero. And in the endless days of July, visitors can hardly breathe without sucking mosquitoes down their throats. Some Alaskans familiar with the refuge, like oil consultant Ken Boyd, don’t understand the attraction of the place. “You can’t see the end of the world from there, but you’re pretty darn close,” says Boyd, a geophysicist who once directed Alaska’s Division of Oil and Gas.

Nobody really knows how much petroleum there is under the ANWR coastal plain. Although oil seeps out of the tundra in some places—staining bogs with a bluish-black sheen—some scientists believe the seeps are evidence that a potential reservoir underneath has been crushed and ruined over geologic time. The most recent study by the U.S. Geological Survey, published in 1998, concluded that several oil deposits—what some geologists call a

“string of pearls”—are located mainly in the west of the ANWR coastal zone. The survey gave a wide range of estimates for how plump those pearls might be. Environmentalists often cite the USGS study to argue that the refuge will likely produce 3.2 billion barrels of oil—less than half of what the United States burns in a single year. That assessment is based on a future oil price of about \$20 per barrel. At about \$15, it could become uneconomical to produce any oil at all. Then again, the USGS estimates for oil that is “technically recoverable”—if oil prices and cost weren’t a factor—range from 5.7 billion to 16 billion barrels. “It’s got billions of barrels of potential and a lot of unknowns,” says Boyd.

Keeping ANWR off limits has undoubtedly increased America’s reliance on oil imports, even if only marginally. Slightly more than half the oil Americans consumed last year was imported, compared with 37 percent in 1980. And the Energy Information Administration projects that dependence on foreign oil will surge further in the decades ahead.

So if we don’t drill in ANWR, where will we drill?

Environmentalists have their own win-win argument: Americans could save far more oil by increasing energy efficiency, they say, than could ever be drilled in places like ANWR. And those savings would reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil, limit U.S. production of greenhouse gases and husband America’s resources for another day. As it is, although Americans account for just 4.5 percent of the world’s population, they consume nearly a quarter of the world’s energy. Europeans pay roughly twice as much at the pump for premium gasoline, and American cars use one-third more energy than European cars. The Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental organization, estimates that increasing fuel-efficiency standards for new cars to 39 miles per gallon over the next decade would save 51 billion barrels of oil over the next 50 years, many times more than even the most optimistic predictions for the Arctic refuge. But the House of Representatives last week, at the same time it approved ANWR drilling, rejected a proposal to substantially boost fuel-efficiency standards for SUVs.

Defenders of the refuge as a wilderness area believe, in any case, that the ecosystem has an intrinsic value beyond oil. They point out that it is one of the last places in the United States where a visitor can still witness a great migration of animals—in this case, caribou. The 130,000-strong Porcupine Herd, named so because it winters near the Porcupine River in Canada, moves every summer into the coastal plain, where the cows usually give birth. The caribou favor the ANWR coast as a natural maternity ward because predators are more scarce here than in the foothills and mountains. Nutritious grasses also are plentiful, and offshore breezes help fend off summer mosquitoes. (Alaskan officials maintain that drilling would have no significant effect on the caribou; conservationists disagree.)

In three days and nights camping on the plain in June, we saw about 20 caribou—the full herd didn’t make it to its traditional calving ground at the

usual time this year because of unusual weather conditions. We also spotted an arctic peregrine falcon, plovers and several other species of birds, arctic ground squirrels and, during our flight out, a herd of shaggy musk oxen. Despite plentiful scat around our campsite, we encountered no grizzlies. But we did find the elusive arctic woolly bear caterpillar, which can live for up to 14 very frigid years before blossoming into a moth.

Geologists argue that with new technologies, including 3-D seismic mapping and horizontal drilling over long distances, they can exploit ecologically sensitive areas with minimal disruption. Conservationists dispute that, but many also argue that the petroleum geologists miss a larger point: that global warming from the burning of fossil fuels presents an even greater potential danger to arctic ecosystems. Polar bears may or may not be affected by seismic thumping, but they surely will suffer from the rapid melting of their habitat. As it is, several animal species are mysteriously declining in Alaska—including a species of sea lion and harbor seals in the Gulf of Alaska—and some scientists attribute that to warming trends.

Arctic drilling will also directly impact local peoples, for good and bad. The 260 Eskimos who live in the village of Kaktovik support onshore oil drilling. And it's not hard to see why. "We don't have any other economy up here," says Kaktovik mayor Lon Sonsalla, who hails from Wisconsin and married into the local community after coming to the village during a military stint in 1977. "If you take away the oil money, you've got a subsistence way of life. All of a sudden you'd be trying to find food, stay warm, keep out of the wind. That would be your main occupation: staying alive."

Yet opponents of oil exploitation in ANWR include a separate group of native Alaskans who live to the south of the refuge. The Gwich'in Indians of Arctic Village worry that oil development will harm the Porcupine caribou herd, which they have hunted for generations. That doesn't mean they aren't open to outside influence: the Gwich'in live in electrified homes, watch satellite TV and drive all-terrain vehicles they call "four wheelers." Yet they equate the potential loss of the caribou with the destruction of buffalo herds for the Sioux, a prelude to cultural catastrophe. "If there were no caribou, we wouldn't have lived here for thousands of years," says Trimble Gilbert, 66. "That's who we are and where we came from."

It's clear that a nonnative like Dirk Nickisch, who flies for a living, needs oil as much as the next guy. But he's also made a conscious choice to lead an austere life. "I have a lot of time up here to think about things," he says. "A lot of people want their high ideals as long as it doesn't cost them anything. They want to save the environment, but they also want to drive their SUVs." Last winter Dirk and his wife, Danielle, sold their three-bedroom, one-and-three-quarter-bath ranch-style house in Fairbanks in favor of a 16-by-24-foot cabin with a loft and a wood stove. "We have a simpler life and have come to enjoy the simpler things."

Many Americans appreciate that sentiment, but would not want to live that life. They may be willing to accept modest changes in their lifestyles, but for how long and to what extent? For an environmentalist out on the coastal plain of the Arctic refuge, in that brief but beautiful season between the harsh winter and the full onslaught of the mosquitoes, the choices seem simple enough. “In 50 or 100 years, would you stand out here and look back and think to yourself, ‘Thank God we opened this area for oil?’” says Dan Ritzman. “No, you wouldn’t. You’d say, ‘Thank God we had the foresight to recognize that there are some places with more value than that.’” Three thousand miles and a world away, in the air-conditioned corridors of Washington, the battle is still on.

With Adam Rogers in Washington and Michael Hsu in New York.