Casting a Cold Eye on Arctic Oil

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF (Op-Ed) 912 words

ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, Alaska -- Here's a helpful hint for backpackers here in the Arctic. If you're lying in your sleeping bag and suddenly feel a pat on the behind from outside the tent, YELL!

Several campers have been subjected to this kind of sexual harassment lately, and when they opened their tent flaps, they found polar bears grinning at them. This refuge is, after all, a bit like a wildlife safari in reverse -- curious animals have the opportunity to gawk at humans.

After rafting and backpacking through this wilderness for a week, weighing whether Congress should allow oil drilling here, I've reached a few conclusions. One is that both the oil industry and environmentalists exaggerate their cases.

For starters, no one has any idea how much oil is here, and we will never know unless it is explored. There has been limited exploration and test drilling in Eskimo-controlled lands in the refuge, but those results have been kept secret. Environmentalists say contemptuously that there's only a six-month supply, while Big Oil speaks of a 25-year spigot -- and they're both talking through their hats.

Estimates range from 3.2 billion barrels (which would supply all U.S. needs for six months) to 16 billion barrels, but these are all wild guesses. The top end of the range would be very significant, coming close to doubling America's proven petroleum reserves of 22 billion barrels, but there is some reason to be skeptical of the higher estimates -- particularly because the oil here may not be economical to extract.

One clue, for example, is that the Badami oil field, almost adjacent to the Arctic refuge, is now being mothballed because it was producing only 1,300 barrels a day instead of the 30,000 expected.

Arctic oil can be chimerical, and it would be tragic to sacrifice this wilderness for a series of dry wells.

It is true that oil drilling would not ravage the entire refuge. Only the coastal plain, 7 percent of the total area, would be open to drilling. The coastal plain is endless brown tundra, speckled with ponds and lakes, boggy and squishy to hike in. It is by far the least scenic part of the refuge, and if one has
to drill somewhere in the area, this is the place to do it

It's also only fair to give special weight to the views of the only people who live in the coastal plain: the Inupiat Eskimos, who overwhelmingly favor drilling (they are poor now, and oil could make them millionaires). One of the Eskimos, Bert Akootchook, angrily told me that if environmentalists were so anxious about the Arctic, they should come here and clean up the petroleum that naturally seeps to the surface of the tundra.

Yet drilling proponents who dismiss the coastal plain as a wasteland -- Alaska's governor, Frank Murkowski, has likened it to a sheet of white paper -- are talking drivel.

They should have been with me as I sleepily opened the tent flap early one morning to see a herd of caribou outside, or beheld the polar bears swimming along the coast, or admired a huge grizzly as it considered dining on nearby musk oxen.

(For a Web tour of the refuge, with audio, maps and photos, including pictures of those musk oxen, see [www.nytimes.com/kristof](http://www.nytimes.com/kristof))

Drilling supporters also grossly understate the impact of drilling when they speak of only a 2,000-acre "footprint" in the Arctic. The reality is that oil would mean roads, lodgings, pipelines, security fences, guard stations and airstrips -- and my children would never be able to experience the Arctic as I have.

True, we need to get our oil from somewhere, and Americans are dying now in Iraq because of our dependence on foreign oil. So I would endorse drilling in the Arctic refuge if it were part of a mega-environmental package that also addressed global warming, an environmental challenge where we have even more at stake than in the Arctic.

Daniel Esty, a Yale scholar of the environment, proposes such a deal -- with trepidation -- in the interest of breaking the national deadlock on environmental policy.

The package could include careful oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (exploratory drilling could be done in winter without permanent damage) and, if it turned out to be the oil lake that proponents claim, commercial drilling as well.

In exchange, the right would accept a beyond-Kyoto framework to control carbon emissions, with tighter standards but a longer time frame. The deal would include $1 billion in additional financing for solar, wind and hydrogen energy, and significant increases in vehicle mileage standards to promote conservation.

Yet President Bush's push to open the Arctic refuge is not part of such a bold and thoughtful package to break the stalemate on the environment. Rather it is simply a lunge for oil. Without trying to conserve oil, Mr. Bush would gobble up a national treasure, the birthright of our descendants, as a first resort.

The argument that I find most compelling is that this primordial wilderness, a part of our national inheritance that is roughly the same as it was a thousand years ago, would be irretrievably lost if we drilled. The Bush administration's proposal to drill is therefore not just bad policy but also shameful, for it would casually rob our descendants forever of the chance to savor this magical coastal plain --
and to be slapped in the butt by a frisky polar bear

CAPTIONS: