A Grizzly's-Eye View of the Land Above the Oil

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF (Op-Ed) 862 words

ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, Alaska -- As I write this, I'm huddled in a tent on the tundra of the wildest part of America, about 175 miles above the Arctic Circle in the last great wilderness virtually untouched by humans other than Eskimos and Indians.

This fate of this wildlife refuge is to be decided by politicians in Washington in perhaps the most contentious debate about the environment today. Supporters of oil drilling make much of the fact that almost none of those who insist on protecting this refuge have ever seen it or ever will, and they sometimes argue that it is a frozen wasteland -- even though their own visits consist mostly of staring down through the windows of a plane.

So I decided to visit for a week -- boots on the ground, or snow -- and backpack and raft through this pristine land now up for grabs. Assuming that my satellite-telephone batteries hold out, I'll write about what the land is really like -- and, on the way, make up my own mind about drilling.

Most of the terrain in the Arctic refuge is not beautiful in a classical sense. The Brooks Range is spectacular, to be sure, but most of the land in the refuge is not so much pretty as awesome. It is endless stark tundra and mountains, rivers and creeks, with scarcely a tree around.

Above all, this is harsh and inhospitable country. Early yesterday, I stepped out of my tent to find that I was being welcomed into September with flurries of wet snow. The wind blows in from the Arctic Ocean, and in winter the wind-chill equivalent is often less than 100 degrees below zero, the point where the charts end. There are no hiking trails here, for only small numbers of humans ever visit, typically in June.

But caribou and bear trails are everywhere. The Arctic refuge is one of the last spots that is pretty much as it was at the time of Lewis and Clark. Still, that can be an argument for drilling. This refuge is so isolated that almost nobody will be on hand to recoil at the sight of oil wells on the tundra. In contrast with more accessible bits of America's outdoors, like the lovely Dome Plateau in Utah, where oil and gas exploration is also proposed, almost the only people who will witness the intrusion of Big Oil will be the wealthiest of tourists, who can afford to charter bush planes.

It's also true that most of the Eskimos who actually live in the refuge favor drilling. They want better
schools, better jobs and more comfortable lives, and most believe that oil drilling is the way to achieve that. Some resent the idea that American environmentalists 5,000 miles away want to lock them forever in a quaint wilderness, just for the psychic value of knowing that it is there.

But just south of the refuge, the Gwich'in Indians want to keep the refuge as it is. "Everybody here is against drilling," said Marjorie John, the storekeeper in Arctic Village, a Gwich'in hamlet of 120 people. "We want to protect the caribou calving ground. Those caribou are part of our culture. They are our culture."

Oil drilling, if it happened, would not occur throughout the 19.5-million-acre refuge (about as big as South Carolina), but in a 1.5-million-acre coastal strip. The Gwich'in depend for sustenance on the Porcupine herd's 120,000 caribou, which calve in the coastal area. I understand the Gwich'in fears, but my guess is that the caribou would do fine with drilling.

The caribou herd in the area around Prudhoe Bay, the center of North Slope drilling, has actually expanded, and I spotted two caribou nonchalantly grazing right by Prudhoe Bay -- while I haven't seen any caribou since a bush pilot set me down in the refuge on Saturday on a riverside bit of gravel.

And yet! It's hailing now against the side of the tent and my fingers are freezing, but I'm thrilled to be here. This land is the last untouched bit of America, and if we develop it we will have robbed our descendants of the chance ever to see our country as it originally was. There is something deeply moving about backpacking through land where humans are interlopers and bears are kings.

One of those bears, a grizzly, approached as I was preparing lunch, then lumbered away. I'm packing bear spray, a kind of Mace used to fend off grizzlies and polar bears. Walt Audi, a legendary bush pilot here, explained how to use the spray: "If a bear attacks you, just spray yourself in the face, and you won't see it." So it's hard to feel that this a place where humans are in charge. And that is precisely what makes the Arctic refuge so special.

CAPTIONS: