What Price Drilling?

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF (Op-Ed) 885 words

ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, Alaska -- In March, Interior Secretary Gale Norton described this area as a "flat white nothingness" that could best be used as an oil spigot.

I thought about that as I rafted down a river here, a giant grizzly bear on my left and a herd of caribou on my right. A bit earlier, I had cooked lunch with my backpacking stove on a sandbar as four musk oxen, huge buffalo-like creatures, observed me as intently as I watched them.

A bush pilot set two friends and me down on a sandbar on Saturday just north of the Brooks Range, and since then we've been rafting and hiking through this wilderness, perhaps the wildest place left on earth. I want to understand this land -- whose future is hotly debated, mostly by people who haven't seen it -- and figure out whether it should be opened to Big Oil.

Here on the ground, it's obvious that this refuge, far from being a barren wasteland, is actually teeming with wildlife, even as winter begins. At one spot, I saw grizzly and wolf tracks side by side, a tribute to the way this South Carolina-sized refuge preserves a patch of America as it was before Europeans arrived.

Moreover, the animals seem completely unused to humans. The first time we spotted a distant herd of caribou, we hauled in our raft downwind and crept up silently. Finally the caribou spotted us, and immediately approached for a closer look. They seemed to be trying to determine whether we were pitifully deformed caribou, and I think the females were encouraging the males to ask us for directions to the rest of the herd as it headed south.

The same thing happened when we sailed our raft as close as we dared to the first musk ox we saw, which came in for a closer look and called its pals to share the excitement. This land is truly an Arctic Serengeti.

Still, I believe that the environmentalists exaggerate the damage that drilling would do to the wildlife. The fact is that humans and animals can coexist. Around Prudhoe Bay, the center for oil drilling west of here, caribou, grizzly and polar bears, and even musk oxen are also plentiful. The same is true of the area around the two permanent native villages to the north and south of the refuge, Kaktovik and Arctic Village.
Indeed, Kaktovik sometimes has polar bears on its airstrip, and a grizzly was found last year on the second floor of the Prudhoe Bay Hotel.

A few months ago a major panel of scientists, oil consultants and environmentalists ended a two-year study of the impact of oil drilling on the Arctic coast. It concluded that wildlife had adapted well to drilling, but that the land itself and the sense of wilderness were far more vulnerable.

Drilling technology has improved tremendously in ways that could limit the damage. In 1970 it took a 65-acre above-ground presence to extract oil from 2,010 acres at a depth of 10,000 feet. At one recent Alaska installation, Alpine Pad 2, a 13-acre pad extracts oil from 32,154 acres. But still, the tundra is exceptionally sensitive -- vehicle ruts from decades ago are still visible. The oil presence and the security that would go with it would fundamentally change the area.

It's true, as the oil industry says, that drilling, if it occurred, would be confined to the 1.5-million-acre coastal plain in a refuge of 19.5 million acres. And frankly, the coastal plain is the least picturesque -- mostly just barren tundra. But as I write this with numb fingers, I'm wrapped in my sleeping bag in my tent on that coastal tundra, and it's still majestic -- and I've seen more wildlife in the area that would be drilled than in the hills and mountains I traversed upriver.

I confess that there are times -- when the rapids drench the raft and turn my feet into blocks of ice: when the chilling fog obliterates a view of anything -- when I'd be ready to trade this landscape to Big Oil for a hot drink and a pizza. But then I warm up, the sun comes out, the mountains emerge from the fog, the caribou approach, and this land warms my heart with its pristine loveliness.

All week, we've seen no sign of humans in the refuge, not even footprints. This is a rare place where humans feel not like landlords or even tenants, but simply guests.

And that's an issue. As an oil industry geologist told me: "We can build cleanly, and we can drill without hurting the caribou. But we can't drill and keep this a wilderness. So that's the choice: Do you want drilling and oil, or do you want to keep this a wilderness?"

My answer? Stay tuned for my next column

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