

“There Is Still Light”

Speech at 25th Anniversary Celebration of the
Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act

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by T. A. Barron

- Hi, I’m Tom Barron. I go by other names, too: “T. A. Barron” (when I’m a writer, as opposed to a human being); and also “Dad” (when I’m taking my kids on a trip to Alaska). Which is often.
- For you see, I’m not a hero of the Alaska Lands Act, like so many of you here today. Nor am I a subsistence hunter and fisher, like my counterparts on this stage. Nor am I even a full-time resident of the state.
- I’m just someone who *loves* this place dearly—and has been here more than thirty times in thirty years, often with my family. So I guess you could call me “a contributing member of the Alaskan economy.” (And if you saw how much food my five kids eat, you would agree!)
- So many trips to Alaska—so many great times. There have been *inspirational times*, such as a visit to the Gwich’in people and the honor of seeing tribal elder Jonathan Solomon’s fish camp; *humorous times*, such as the summer trip to Alaska where my kids held a contest to find the outhouse with the best view (who won, I’ll tell you privately); and *thoughtful times* that have changed me forever.
- One of those thoughtful moments came one morning at dawn, on a lake, when I sat in a canoe with my five-year-old daughter, Denali. We listened to the lake life waking up—then heard, through the rising mist, the haunting call of a loon. That is a sound, as all of you know, that seems to come not just across space, from over the water, but also across time—from somewhere eons and eons ago. As the last echoes of that call finally faded away, my daughter turned to me and asked, “Daddy, why does that sound make me feel so sad?” I thought for a moment, then replied, “It is sad, isn’t it? In the way that mortal life is poignant, beautiful, and sad. But it’s also something more. To me, it sounds like longing. Like yearning. For a time, and a place, when *all creatures* spoke the same language, when all creatures were friends.” Denali listened, then said with the clarity of a five-year-old: “Daddy, I want to be the loon’s friend, again.”
- Why do I keep coming back to Alaska? For moments like that. And if you’d like a more comprehensive answer—just look at what the Alaska Lands Act accomplished. For here we have protected, to use President Jimmy Carter’s word, “a miracle.”

- Alaska is a miracle—of *land*, of *people*, and of *the spirit*. And in these *dark times* in which we live, those are all *rays of light*.
- Let me briefly explain:
- *The land is a kind of light*. Radiating from those arboreal castles of Sitka spruce in Southeast Alaska, to the majestic sweeps of the Arctic coast; from the peaks lit by alpenglow and the braided rivers that run down from them, pulsing like the veins from a beating heart—rivers that embrace the salmon, support the caribou, and feed the eagle; *the land of Alaska literally shines*.
- And it's big. Very big. Big enough to illuminate—and to inspire—us all.
- *The people here are a kind of light*: Truly, those people are a whole wondrous *rainbow* of colors and customs, traditions and songs, work and wisdom.
- *And the spiritual qualities of this place are also a kind of light*. There is *no way* to place a monetary value on this kind of inspiration—which is why those who want to *devour and destroy* it for profit, who see in Alaska merely oil barrels and board feet, are utterly blind.
- For the sacred place we call Alaska cannot be valued in money, oil, or gold—but only in *the enduring currency of the soul*.
- So much light! In *land*, in *people*, and in *spirit*.
- So ... a dark time it is, my friends.
- But there is *still* Alaska—the place with *the most to save*, and *the most to lose*, of anywhere on Earth.
- What *greater place*, what *greater cause*, could we possibly find in our lives? A place where we can truly be a friend of the loon, again.
- That is why we must rededicate ourselves to saving it! To keeping intact what we have protected. So that, throughout *all time*, and *all generations to come*, people can say:
- “There is *still* Alaska. There is *still* light.”