

Wondrously Blank: A Plea for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

By T. A. Barron
For the NRDC Action Fund
August, 2005

The world would be far poorer, Aldo Leopold famously observed, “without a blank spot on the map.” Yet it wasn’t long ago that U.S. Senator Frank Murkowski from Alaska stood in the Senate chamber and declared indignantly that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was no more remarkable than a blank piece of paper.

What, really, is a blank spot on the map? What is its value? These questions are difficult to answer—especially for a money-driven, mechanized society such as ours.

A blank spot, despite its lack of attention from mapmakers, is not empty. While it is devoid of cities, villages, roads, and monuments (as well as drill rigs, trash heaps, billboards, and wrecked vehicles)—it may be full of other attractions. Such as scenic wonder. Or silence. Or wildlife in grand abundance.

And something else, as well. A blank spot on the map often contains precious opportunities for people to explore their outer world—and their inner selves. For a blank spot implies no limits. It is a place of endless reach—for the sunlit horizon, as well as for the human spirit.

No place on our planet is more richly, wondrously blank than the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Within its nearly twenty million acres of terrain lies the last stretch of protected coastline in Alaska, as well as the coastal plain—the fragile tundra wetland that is America’s premier birthing ground for arctic wildlife. Caribou migrate over 1,000 miles round trip every year to reach this place; migratory birds from every corner of the country seek refuge here.

This is the place that George Bush, Dick Cheney, and their supporters in the energy industry want to invade and cover with roads, drilling pads, and heavy machinery. To fill in the map. To darken one of the most pristine spots on Earth.

If they do succeed—on the spurious claim that our nation absolutely must suck out whatever oil lurks beneath this land (even though the most inflated estimates show the Refuge providing only a tiny fraction of America’s needs, and only delivering that a decade from now)—they will, indeed, darken this spot. With the inevitable oil spills on the tundra. With the bodies of dead caribou calves. And, worst of all, with the shadows of a lost opportunity to protect a place that is truly sacred—and wondrously blank.