

## Another Attack on the Arctic

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By BRUCE BABBITT

BARROW, Alaska - Thwarted by the public in its efforts to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to drilling, the Bush administration and the oil companies are now quietly turning their attention to the balance of the Arctic region of Alaska, all the way west to the Chukchi Sea, within sight of Siberia. In advance of its efforts, the administration has jettisoned environmental safeguards and is now threatening the traditional-use rights of the Alaska Natives who have hunted caribou and waterfowl along the Arctic slope for thousands of years.

This plan was announced in Anchorage just as Congress recessed for the Reagan funeral. Outside Alaska it has received little notice, not even for its centerpiece - a proposal to lease rights for oil and gas development in Teshekpuk Lake, a body of water that is vital to the region. This shallow lake, which is about 30 miles across, is the biological heart of the western Arctic, the summer nesting and breeding ground for hundreds of thousands of black brant, spectacled eider, yellow-billed loons, white-fronted geese and other migratory birds that arrive here each year from 32 of the lower 48 states as well as countries as far south as Argentina.

The lake, however, isn't just for the birds. It is also a critically important subsistence area for the indigenous Inupiat communities on the Arctic slope. They go there to hunt and fish for food to sustain them through the long, dark winters.

Teshekpuk Lake lies within the western region of what is known as the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska. In 1976 Congress transferred the management of the petroleum reserve to the Bureau of Land Management. But Congress also mandated protections for the wildlife and native peoples, making it clear that America's Arctic should not be transformed into another West Texas oilfield.

In 1998 the Clinton administration took the first steps to open the reserve with a two-year study involving hundreds of scientists and representatives of the Inupiat communities. Two years later the scientific teams returned with a recommendation to begin oil leasing, with stipulations for setting aside approximately 13 percent of the study area, mostly rivers and lakes, including Teshekpuk, as protected areas. They also recommended a ban on permanent roads across the fragile tundra, based upon assurances from the oil companies that they could operate with temporary winter "ice roads" that would simply melt away as summer approached and waterfowl and migratory caribou began congregating at the lake.

The Bush administration now proposes to eliminate these safeguards intended to protect the lake, the wildlife and the Inupiat who depend on it. The decision is not yet final. During the summer there will be hearings in Anchorage and Washington. Then, Interior Secretary Gale Norton is expected to make a decision. In this land of endless summer days, there are bound to be a lot of sleepless nights.

Bruce Babbitt was secretary of the interior from 1993 to 2001.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/08/opinion/08BABB.html?ex=1090291161&ei=1&en=ca792d4181a8fc43>