



CoastalPlain_EIS, BLM_AK <blm_ak_coastalplain_eis@blm.gov>

[EXTERNAL] Comments from American Packrafting Association

1 message

Brad Meiklejohn <bradmeiklejohn69@gmail.com>

Thu, Jun 7, 2018 at 1:18 PM

To: blm_ak_coastalplain_EIS@blm.gov

Dear BLM folks,

Please find our comments attached regarding the Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain.

Sincerely,

Brad Meiklejohn
American Packrafting Association



Arctic Refuge APA Comments.pdf

145K



American Packrafting Association

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I am Brad Meiklejohn and I am here on behalf of the American Packrafting Association. We represent 2,000 members in 30 countries. For us, the Arctic Refuge is a sacred wild place on a very crowded planet.

I have spent the last 33 years getting to know the Arctic Refuge. I have traversed it in every possible direction, and spent months immersed in the wild silence. The Arctic Refuge is a major reason that I live in Alaska. Members of the American Packrafting Association come from around the world to experience the Arctic Refuge. Many others may never visit the refuge but it's important to them that it is there. For me, and for thousands of people like me, it's our refuge.

You may have the idea that the earth still has plenty of wild places. Perhaps you imagine them to be found in Africa, or Australia or the furthest reaches of South America. Sadly, it's just not true. The number of vast wild places that take you days to traverse without encountering the sounds, smells, and structures of man is down to a small handful. We have nearly completed the job of converting the entire planet to the needs of man.

This story isn't about caribou or oil. It's about restraint. Restraint is an under-rated virtue these days. Who could be against ease, comfort and convenience, bigger cars or yet another strip mall lined with Jack in the Box and Home Depot? It's hard to go against our base desires of greed and hunger, but we are usually glad when we find the courage to say "no." We said "no" to proposals to dam the Grand Canyon and to tap Yellowstone's geysers for commercial heating and now all Americans are grateful for our restraint.

What are we getting in exchange for the wild places we pave, mine and drill? Here in Alaska we have the odd paradox of a fierce pride in our wild salmon but a hellbent determination to become New Jersey with mountains. "If you don't know where you are going you'll end up somewhere else," as Yogi Berra observed.

Alaskans have this funny idea that we know best when it comes to taking care of nature. But the facts say otherwise. Does the Exxon Valdez ring a bell? Between 1996 and 2004 there were 4,532 reported oil spills on the North Slope. Alaskans howled in unison when Jimmy Carter protected our global treasures. And we quickly tumble into bed with every mine and oil rig that promises jobs for Oklahomans. Just today there was a report out about our Congressional delegation colluding with industry and the Army Corps of Engineers to gut protections for

Alaska's rivers and wetlands. And the oil industry is pouring millions of dollars into opposing a ballot initiative to better protect salmon habitat. Whether it's the Arctic Refuge or Pebble Mine, all you have to do is follow the money. Those of us with nothing to gain can afford to tell the truth.

The fate of the Arctic Refuge is not just for Alaskans to decide. Alaskans complain bitterly about decisions made back in D.C., but all Americans have a right to object to this decision being made in Alaska. For 40 years the American public has said "no" to turning this wild place into yet another industrialized zone. There ought to be a statute of limitations that says if you win five times in a row the issue is settled.

While the APA and its members share the concerns that others raise about impacts to wildlife, to water quality and to air quality, there are five potential impacts to values important to packrafters that I wish to highlight.

Wilderness Quality:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that the Coastal Plain area qualifies for Wilderness designation. This is an understatement. The Coastal Plain and the entirety of the Arctic Refuge are the paradigm of wilderness. Few greater examples of vast, untrammelled land remain anywhere on the planet. Here you can go for days, even weeks, on foot or by boat, without seeing, hearing, or smelling the dominant sign of man. Natural processes unfold unimpaired here as they have for millions of years.

It is worth highlighting just how rare large wild places are outside of Alaska. In the lower 48 there is no place that is more than 20 miles from a road. Even the largest "wilderness" areas there can be easily traversed in two to three days. From the highest ridgetops you are still able to see the cities, roads, lights and haze that strangle what's left of the wild. Outside of the United States, besides Antarctica, the northern reaches of Canada, portions of the Amazon Basin and parts of Siberia, there are extremely few places that match the wilderness character of the Arctic Refuge.

Despite the stated intention to confine industrial activities to a 2,000-acre footprint, there is no way to avoid significant impacts to the world-class wilderness qualities found in the Coastal Plain and to the adjacent designated wilderness areas. For the same reasons that we don't site a landfill next to a church, so we shouldn't have an industrial oil complex next to the finest wilderness area on the planet. At a very minimum, some attempt should be made to keep development activities well away from the southern boundary of the Coastal Plain to minimize impacts to the designated wilderness areas to the south.

Natural Silence:

One of the greatest attributes of the Arctic Refuge is natural silence. Here you can go for weeks at a time without hearing any sounds made by human activities, other than one's own breathing and conversation. The silence is so deep that here you can easily experience the "sound of silence" which is the natural hum of the planet.

This attribute of natural silence is so rare in the modern world that most people have never had the opportunity to experience real quiet. Our lives are filled with the sounds of motors, traffic, air planes, and the beeps and pings of cell phones. It can be disorienting the first time you fall into natural silence as your mind grasps for something familiar. For the first time we are aware of the honk of geese at high altitude, or the click of caribou tendons from a small herd passing ¼ mile away.

Because of this deep natural quiet, human generated sounds can be perceived over great distances. The hum of approaching small planes can be detected at a distance of fifty miles or more. The generators of Kaktovik can be heard at Bitty on the Jago River if the wind is from the north. Mitigating the loss of natural silence that will result from industrial development in the 1002 area seems almost impossible.

Visual Quality:

Like wilderness character and natural silence, the visual quality of the Coastal Plain area is an attribute that modern humans are not attuned to appreciate. We are so accustomed to a landscape dominated by human structures that at first our eyes scan for the familiar outline of buildings. The sight distances and visual clarity are so great that the structures of Kaktovik, such as the big white golf ball antenna, are visible from the foothills of the Brooks Range nearly 100 miles south. This is a landscape that is so completely natural that even small things, like a 55-gallon drum, can loom like mountains on the Coastal Plain. There is no way to hide industrial development on the Coastal Plain. Any structure taller than 50 feet will be visible from great distances.

Public Access:

The APA is concerned that public access will be restricted in any areas that become industrialized. Public access to the areas around the Prudhoe Bay oil fields is prohibited, creating a zone of exclusion that is much greater than the actual industrial footprint. We would be especially concerned about retaining public access to those areas along any of the floatable river and stream corridors, which include the lesser traveled Okpilak, Aichilik, Jago, Sadlerochit, and Turner rivers. Packrafts draw less than 4" of water and allow for easy travel on creeks and streams not typically thought to be navigable. Dozens of these smaller water bodies traverse the Coastal Plain and should be considered as travel corridors that are kept open for public use.

Natural Baseline:

The Coastal Plain is the only portion of Alaska's North Slope that is not currently available for development. Just as "the first rule in intelligent tinkering is to keep all the pieces," knowing the unimpaired baseline conditions is the first rule of intelligent conservation planning. For decades we have had the benefit of using the Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain as the unimpaired baseline to know how activities elsewhere on the north slope are affecting natural systems. Losing that natural baseline jeopardizes our ability to effectively manage the entire North Slope.

Converting one of the very few wild places left on the planet to an industrial zone is a decision we will regret. We wish we hadn't killed off the last wild buffalo herds, or the last flocks of

passenger pigeons. Perhaps we can say we didn't know any better at that time. But this time we do. We can say with certainty that we will regret losing our greatest natural heritage to greed, indifference, and lack of imagination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'B. Meiklejohn', with a stylized, flowing script.

Brad Meiklejohn
American Packrafting Association

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