



CoastalPlain_EIS, BLM_AK <blm_ak_coastalplain_eis@blm.gov>

[EXTERNAL] Listen

1 message

Christin Swearingen <mushroomchristin@gmail.com>

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To: blm_ak_coastalplain_EIS@blm.gov

The Gwich'in People, for millennia, have known the coastal plain of the Refuge as "Izhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit" or "the sacred place where life begins."

Evon Peter—who is Gwich'in and Koyukon from Arctic Village, a tribal leader, and now a Vice chancellor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks—once said that the spiritual reason for fighting oil and gas activities in the coastal plain was "very difficult to speak of." "The animals, the rivers—we're essentially a voice for things that cannot talk. We don't see ourselves as separate from those things. If the rivers and animals are poisoned, the poisons will work their way into us, too," Peter told visiting author Peter Matthiessen. (This is recorded in Subhankar Banerjee's 2003 photographic book Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land.) Peter took Matthiessen to talk with an elder, Trimble Gilbert. Gilbert explained that, in Gwich'in stories, "Caribou has a piece of Man's heart in its heart and Man has a piece of Caribou's heart in his heart, so that each will always know what the other is doing." As Gwich'in Steering Committee Executive Director Bernadette Demientieff said in the April 24, 2018 Fairbanks Daily News-Miner,

Drilling in the Arctic Refuge will slice through the heart of these sacred lands, the heart of my people. The push to drill in the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge is a direct threat to my people. It is an attack on our culture and way of life.

The GSC has been defending—based on tribal consensus—the coastal plain against oil and gas and for sacredness and Gwich'in culture for 30 years now.

The coastal plain is ground sacred to Gwich'in People. Its sacredness means they do not enter it, not even in times of famine. This is ground that supports the Porcupine Caribou Herd's cows, nursing calves who grow strong there and feed their People and their way of life. It is their only way. It is the sovereign right and responsibility of the Gwich'in Nation to keep it.

Wilderness.

The Definition of "wilderness" according to the 1964 U.S. "Wilderness Act," Public Law 88-577 is as follows:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

There are many important distinctions between what "white" people mean by wilderness and what it means to the Gwich'in People for a place to be sacred. The shortcomings of the above definition are clear. It does not, for example, openly embrace the ongoing presence of Alaska Natives and other Native Tribes throughout the U.S. who have been excluded from their ancestral lands as not "natural" enough to be part of white people's ideals of "untrammelled" lands.

Yet, there may also be deep-rooted similarities. And, among white people there have always been some, perhaps many, whose hearts—unconsumed by the corporate-industrial mind—are themselves tied to land, who know their belonging. There have always been those who understand that land's health and their own flourishing are inseparable; that the land's ancient, re/generative beauty is the origins of and sustains their own; who understand that land's co-creativity is the source of both human economy and imagination. There have always been, and still are, those who understand that human dominance over land is pyrrhic.

As Utah-born author Terry Tempest Williams wrote,

The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with clasped hands that we might act with restraint, leaving too for the life that is destined to come.

To protect what is wild is to protect what is gentle. Perhaps the wilderness we fear is the pause within our own heartbeats, the silent space that says we live only by grace. Wilderness lives by this same grace.

We have it within our power to create merciful acts.

The act of restraint by the United States Congress in the name of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would be the most powerful act of all. Call it the Act of Wild Mercy, an interval of silence sustained in the twenty-first century.

And, for generations to come.

P.L. 115-97 is not a done deal. It was conceived in the dark, out of reach of democracy, and imposed on the country. It betrays the letter and intent of pre-existing laws, including the National Environmental Policy Act [NEPA] and The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act [ANCILA] among relevant others, as well as international agreements.

Refuge lands surrounding the coastal plain have already been designated as “wilderness.” Putting oil and gas works in the midst of this vast, sacred, wild lifescape would interrupt the fierce grace of the Refuge. Interrupting this space would disrupt the land, harm or even extinguish its buff-breasted sandpipers, snow geese and caribou, slice the heart of Gwich’in People, and stop the hearts of millions of others.

NEPA says this scoping process and coastal plain EIS must be based on “a systematic, interdisciplinary approach” with the aim of considering all “environmental amenities and values...” This includes spiritual values, matters of our hearts.

I know that the corporate-industrial mind—the mind that says “energy dominance” and “dollars”—scoffs at anything gentle, at mercy, at the blood of beating hearts. Scoff it may. Gentleness and mercy—the wildness inside us—can be surprising. We have the rule of law and we have the power in us to do right.

As Demientieff says,

Let me issue a declaration to those who refuse to listen. The Gwich’in people will not be silent. We will not stand down. We will fight to protect the Porcupine Caribou Herd and the sacred lands of the Arctic Refuge every step of the way.

And so, too, will the hosts who walk beside them to defend the wilderness of the coastal plain.