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ALASKA BATTLEGROUND

Should the U.S. drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge? The question hits home near the nature preserve, where two Native groups have taken opposite sides in the increasingly heated debate

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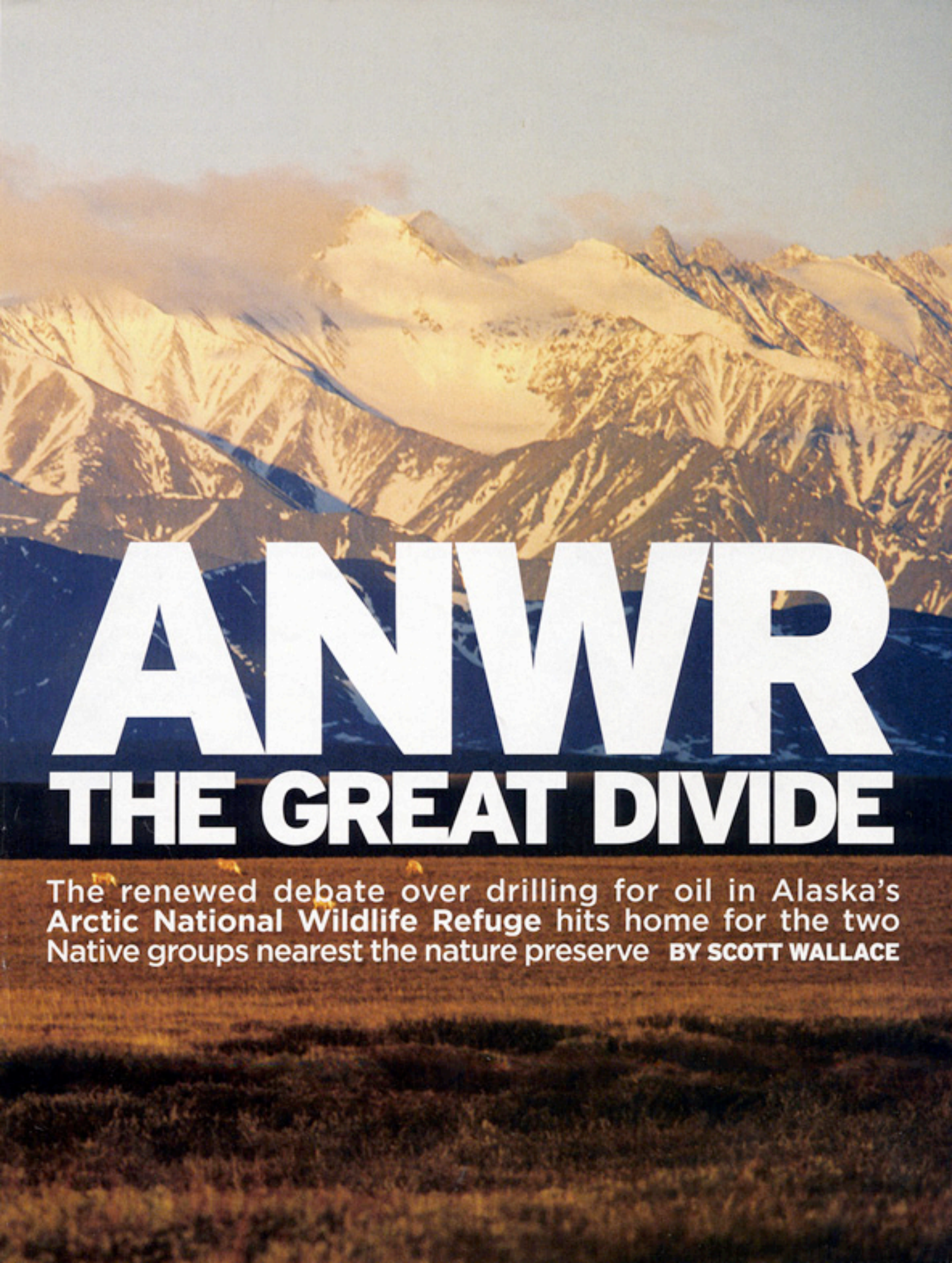

ANWR

THE GREAT DIVIDE

The renewed debate over drilling for oil in Alaska's **Arctic National Wildlife Refuge** hits home for the two Native groups nearest the nature preserve **BY SCOTT WALLACE**

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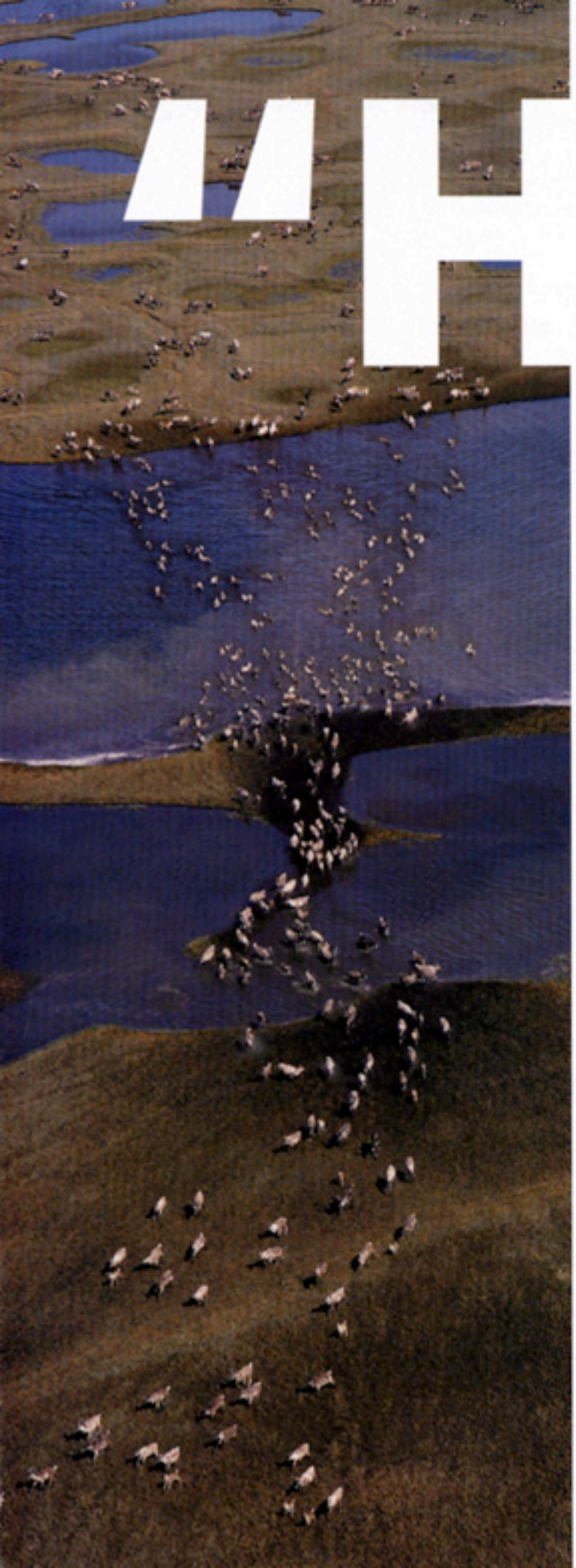
No one disputes the beauty of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's coastal plain, with the majestic Brooks Range looming behind it. But where some see the 1.5 million acres in northeastern Alaska as the calving grounds for the Porcupine River caribou herd, others see billions of barrels of oil waiting to be extracted.



"Hear that howling out there?"

Charlie Swaney asked, cocking an ear and shifting the weight of the rifle slung on his shoulder. The cry of a lone wolf echoed in the distance. "That's a good sign. When there's wolf around, that means they're following the caribou."

It was just after 4 a.m., and the Arctic sky was smeared with orange rippled clouds that hung low over the mountains to the north. Songbirds greeted the dawn with riotous chirping from the tops of spindly spruce trees, whose black silhouettes rose straight around us.

Half Gwich'in and half Ahtna Indian, Swaney, 47, has lived all of his life in the boreal forests of the Alaskan north. On this chilly morning in early May, he wore a hat made from a wolverine he trapped years ago pulled down tight on his thick salt-and-pepper hair.

The night before, we had sat drinking coffee at his kitchen window, looking out on the mountains blanketed in snow as he dispensed tidbits of Native wisdom. If you see wolves digging in the snow, most likely an avalanche has buried a group of caribou there. If you kill a crow for no good reason, the weather will turn bad. "It's true," he insisted when he saw my raised eyebrow. "I've seen it happen."

What is certain is that when Swaney and his fellow Gwich'in hunters bring back fresh caribou to their homes in Arctic Village, they bring joy as well—especially to the children. "Their attitude changes," he said. "You can see it in their faces. They know they're going to be eating good."

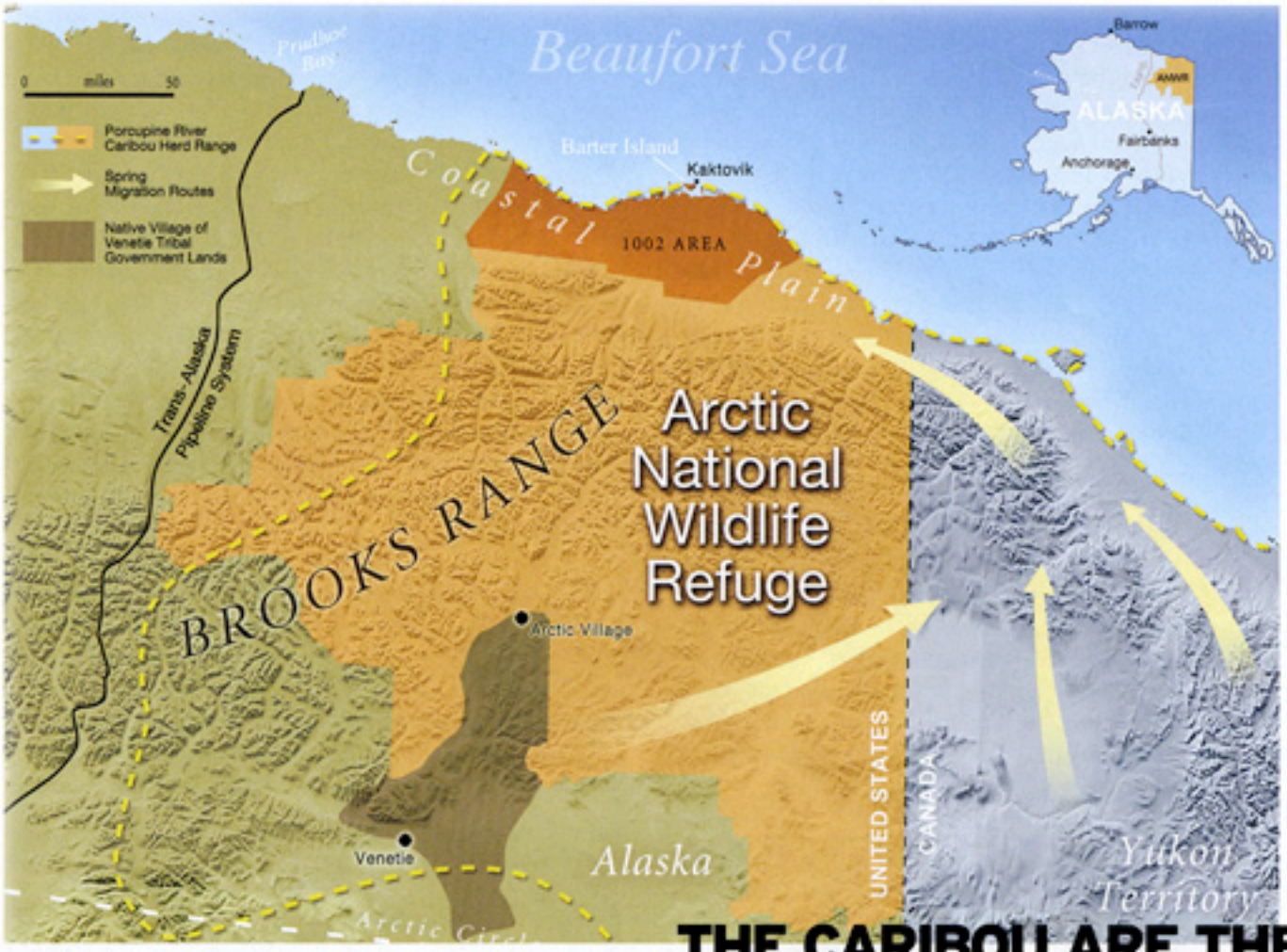
Our hunt would begin at dawn with five other men. The caribou had been sighted two days earlier by bush pilots out on the tundra south of Arctic Village. The animals were probably from the Porcupine River caribou herd, the unlikely focus of one of the most intractable and divisive environmental debates in our nation's history: whether the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, or ANWR, should be opened up for oil exploration.

Down in the lower 48, the tangle between oil industry proponents and environmentalists, between Republicans and Democrats and between conservatives and liberals over ANWR centers on issues of energy self-sufficiency versus preservation of a pristine wilderness. But here, above the Arctic Circle, the debate is less abstract, with two Native Alaskan peoples locked in a complex dispute over oil development on the coastal tundra.

On one side are the militantly traditionalist Gwich'in—7,000 people living in 15 settlements scattered along the caribou's migration route between northeastern Alaska and the Canadian Yukon. On the other are roughly 9,000 Inupiat Eskimo, whose once-ramshackle coastal villages have been transformed into modern communities with schools, clinics and indoor plumbing since oil started flowing from Alaska's North Slope in the late 1970s.

SCOTT WALLACE has covered indigenous people throughout the Americas. This is his first article for SMITHSONIAN.

MICHIO HOSHINO / MINDEN PICTURES, PP. 46, 49 ART WOLFE



The Porcupine River herd migrates (facing page) to the coastal plain's 1002 area to calf in the spring. The refuge, and whether to exploit its oil riches, divide the Gwich'in people of Arctic Village and the Inupiat of Kaktovik.

THE CARIBOU ARE THE UNLIKELY FOCUS OF ONE OF THE MOST DIVISIVE ENVIRONMENTAL DEBATES IN OUR NATION'S HISTORY.

The Gwich'in fear that drilling in ANWR will put an end to their existence as subsistence caribou hunters, while the Inupiat worry that without development of ANWR's gas and oil reserves, the money to support their modern comforts will disappear. To most Gwich'in, the Inupiat are motivated by greed, and have sold out their traditional culture for the lure of oil dollars; to many Inupiat, the Gwich'in are hopeless romantics, living voluntarily in squalor to cling to a way of life that is bound to disappear.

Though ANWR's coastal plain hosts a dazzling abundance of wildlife—the largest concentration of land-denning polar bears in Alaska; enormous flocks of migratory birds; wolves, wolverines, musk ox, Arctic fox and snowy owls—the caribou remain the symbol of the fight over the refuge. It's the one animal that moves through the full range of Arctic and subarctic ecosystems: barrier islands, coastal plain, mountain talus, boreal forest and alpine tundra. Even the boundaries of ANWR were largely determined by the range of the Porcupine River herd.

Some of the herd, which numbered 123,000 when last counted in 2001, migrate nearly 3,000 miles each year, zigzagging to and from their calving grounds on a long, narrow strip of coastal plain some 150 miles north of Arctic Village. Though the plain takes up a relatively small corner of the 19.6 million-acre refuge, conservationists describe it as ANWR's most important and environmentally sensitive area. The Gwich'in call it the "sacred place where life begins." An idyllic nursery for the nearly 40,000 caribou calves born here each year, it provides protection from wolves and grizzlies, while offering a diet of nutritious grasses for the calves' lactating mothers. The plain also happens to sit atop what is believed to be billions of barrels of untapped oil.

Unseasonably high spring temperatures were rapidly melting the snow around Arctic Village, so Swaney and his fellow hunters (see "On a Caribou Hunt," p. 56) had to move quickly. This would be their final chance to secure meat to last their families until fall, when they would hunt the cari-

DOUG STERN

bou again as the animals returned from the coastal plain. But this year, with Congress on the verge of deciding whether to allow oil drilling on the coastal plain, the Gwich'in have far more on their minds than the success of the season's hunt.

They fear that the caribou could shift their migration routes away from Native villages or even cease to exist as a migratory herd if oil development begins in the refuge. While the Gwich'in hunt other game, such as moose and ptarmigan, they call themselves the "People of the Caribou" and say the blood of the animal flows in their veins. The caribou figures in all of their rituals, traditional dances and stories, and nothing marks their annual calendar like the comings and goings of the Porcupine herd. More prosaically, the caribou is the Gwich'in's major source of food. "If it's gone," said Swaney, "what are we going to do?"

THE INUPIAT Eskimo village of Kaktovik, Alaska, is on Barter Island, just offshore from the mainland. Once a trading center for whalers and hunters who plied the frigid waters along the Arctic coast, today Kaktovik is a village of prim, oil-heated houses, wide, gravel streets, a large, fully-staffed school, a police station and a power plant. All of it has been made possible by tax revenues generated from the Prudhoe Bay oil fields, about 100 miles to the west, during the past three decades of oil production on the North Slope.

THE GWICH'IN SAY THE INUPIAT HAVE SOLD OUT THEIR TRADITIONAL CULTURE FOR THE LURE OF OIL DOLLARS.

Just a stone's throw south of town lies ANWR's coastal plain—1.5 million acres of tundra potentially available for oil exploration, hemmed in between the slopes of the Brooks Range and the Arctic shore. The tract is called the "1002" area (universally referred to as "Ten-Oh-Two") for a clause in the 1980 federal legislation that expanded the refuge to include much of the U.S. range of the caribou herd while, at the same time, setting aside the coastal plain for possible future oil and gas development.

Most of Kaktovik's 300 residents are shareholders in two Native natural resource companies—the Kaktovik Inupiat Corporation and the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, or ASRC. Respectively, the companies own the surface and subsurface rights to 92,000 acres within the 1002 area and stand to reap a windfall if there's a major oil strike on ANWR's coastal plain.

With $1.32 billion in revenue last year from consulting and oil industry support services, the ASRC is among the most successful of the 13 Native regional corporations established by the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The legislation required Native Alaskans to relinquish aboriginal claims to their land in exchange for collective corporate ownership of 44 million acres throughout Alaska, apportioned among the 13 corporations, and $1 billion in start-up funds. The corporations were then free to lease the land.

The Gwich'in of Arctic Village and neighboring Venetie chose not to participate in the land distribution under the act and also declined the seed money that the rest of Alaska's Natives have used to improve, in many cases dramatically, their standard of living. Instead, the Gwich'in held on to their land—almost two million acres of spruce taiga, rolling foothills, twisting, braided rivers and vast stretches of alpine tundra bordering ANWR's southern flank. Now they have their homeland and its abundance of fish and wildlife, but they enjoy few of the creature comforts the Inupiat have on the North Slope.

Carla Sims Kayotuk, 38, is torn. She was raised in Kaktovik, and today her family owns one of the village's two grocery stores. Although she worries that unsightly oil pipelines,

"We've never thought of ourselves as poor," says Sarah James (below). "We're rich in our hearts." Danny Gemmill (below right) says drilling proponents "don't know what wilderness is about." Charlie Swaney, with Mutt, has always lived in the Arctic woods.

the high-pitched scream of winches and the clatter of helicopters will forever mar the tranquil landscape close to her village, she also worries about declining oil production in the Prudhoe Bay fields. "If we don't have the oil development," she says, "where are we going to get our money from?"

As I walked around Kaktovik's windblown streets, a small car pulled up beside me. Crammed into the compact was Robert Thompson, a burly 58-year-old Inupiat wilderness guide. He offered me a tour of the island, where—despite the oil money—many people still derive much of their diet and cultural identity from subsistence hunting and whaling. We cruised slowly past Kaktovik's tidy modular houses, out past the large aluminum hangar that serves as the town's airport.

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THE GWICH'IN: PEOPLE OF THE CARIBOU

Raymond Tritt, 52, dresses a fallen bull on the spring caribou hunt. Like virtually every Gwich'in man, he still remembers every detail of his first successful hunt, four decades later. The 100,000-plus caribou of the Porcupine River herd are a focal point for the Gwich'in people: they are a main source of sustenance as well as the key element in the group's rituals, dances and stories. "If we lose the caribou," says a tribal elder, "we lose our way of life."

Thompson says he finds the Gwich'in's defense of their cultural values "admirable," adding that the prospect of oil development on the nearby tundra has opened a rift among local residents. We passed an SUV idling at a stop sign amid a cloud of exhaust and vapor. As if to prove Thompson's point, a local Eskimo official, sitting impassively behind the wheel, responded to Thompson's wave with an icy stare. "He used to wave," Thompson shrugged. "But now he doesn't."

This past spring, nearly one-third of Kaktovik's voting-age adults signed a petition opposing oil development in ANWR—fearing, according to Kayotuk, that onshore oil drilling would lead to offshore leasing, endangering the annual bowhead whale hunt, the core of the Eskimo culture across the North Slope.

Still, most Kaktovik residents support oil development in the 1002, though they would agree with Karl Francis, a pro-oil adviser retained by Kaktovik's city council to serve as a buffer between local authorities and the outside world. It must be done "responsibly," he says, with minimal impact on the environment, hunting and whaling to ensure the long-range survival of the people and their traditions. Those who favor drilling, he acknowledged, also hope that outside corrosive effects, such as drugs and alcohol, can be kept at bay even after the road needed to develop the oil fields reaches Kaktovik.

"This is a little village living on a time bomb," Francis said. "We're sitting on top of a huge pool of oil, and the people here need to have a say about how it's developed. We're trying to strategize how this town will be around 200 years from now, with everyone happy and healthy."

THE INUPIAT: DRIVEN BY OIL?

Like many other villages across the Arctic, Kaktovik reaps the fruits of oil production on Alaska's North Slope: a new school, a police department, electricity and, just recently, indoor plumbing. A major oil strike on ANWR's coastal plain, two miles south of Kaktovik, could mean a windfall for many of the Inupiat villagers. Still, their support for drilling there is tempered by concern that it could lead to oil exploration offshore, which could threaten whaling.

THE FRONTIER AIRWAYS prop plane cleared the Kaktovik runway, climbing up through spotty turbulence into a vast milky whiteness in which sky, land and sea were virtually indistinguishable. After about 15 or 20 minutes, the first of the Prudhoe Bay oil rigs came into view, looking like a squat sentinel keeping watch over the barren tundra. Soon I could see an entire maze of roads, huge rectangular plastic-lined reserve pits for leftover drilling fluids, gas flares, gravel drill pads and miles of large-diameter pipe set above the permafrost on stilts, snaking off into the distance—a colossal industrial complex sprawling across the land.

Since 1977, at least 14 billion barrels of Alaskan crude have been pumped from the North Slope through the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) to its terminus at the port of Valdez, 800 miles to the south. The oil industry has created tens of thousands of jobs in Alaska while generating mind-boggling wealth; $69 billion in oil revenues have flowed into state coffers as of 2004. The North Slope Borough, a county-level jurisdiction that encompasses most of the Arctic coastal communities on the North Slope, collects tens of millions of dollars in additional taxes from the oil fields each year.

But North Slope production is drying up, fueling the clamor to develop ANWR. Officials from the oil industry and the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, sensitive to the public outcry that has accompanied the prospect of drilling in the refuge, say they can "shrink the footprint" using new technologies and directional drilling to reduce environmental damage. Industry lobbyists, and President Bush himself, say that a mere 2,000 acres would be directly affected. But drilling opponents argue that the affected land would not be concentrated on one patch of ground but rather would be sprawled across the 1002 area—a spider web of roads, pipes and drilling pads.

I could find no one who knew for sure where the 2,000-acre figure originated, but energy consultant Ken Boyd, the former director of oil and gas for the State of Alaska, says he believes it's extrapolated from actual operations at the state-

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of-the-art Alpine field west of Prudhoe Bay. Boyd acknowledges that the figure may be wildly inaccurate and that it does not include the miles of pipeline that would be necessary to move oil out of the refuge. "I believe that with current technology, most of the pipeline from ANWR will be aboveground," Boyd says. "If they could bury the pipeline, that would solve the footprint problem."

There's also disagreement over what drill rigs in ANWR would mean for the caribou. Matthew Cronin, a University of Alaska at Fairbanks professor of population genetics and a consultant to the oil industry, believes wildlife and industrial development can coexist. He points to the six-fold growth since the late 1970s of the Central Arctic herd, now some 32,000 caribou strong, despite a tangle of roads and pipelines in and around the Prudhoe Bay oil fields. "There is abundant evidence showing caribou using habitat around oil fields," he told me.

Carla Sims Kayoktuk, (with husband, Lee, lower left) co-owns a village grocery store (left). Bicycling in snow is tough, so Robert Thompson (below) prefers dog sledding. Says Oliver Leavitt, in Barrow, of the oil-fueled economy: "Nothing else sustains jobs."

But Fran Mauer, a biologist who spent two decades working in the refuge for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, says both the terrain and the demographics of the Porcupine herd are vastly different from those of the Central Arctic herd. The Brooks Range in ANWR, he says, constricts the Porcupine herd's nursery to an area about one-fifth the size of the Central herd's. And the Porcupine herd is four times larger than the Central herd, making for extremely crowded conditions. Were oil development to push the Porcupine herd up the mountain slope to calve, as many expect, Mauer says the young caribou will be far more vulnerable to natural predators: wolves, bears, wolverines and raptors.

Just a 5 percent decline in calf survival, Mauer went on, might result in an irreversible decrease in herd size. And smaller herds occupy smaller ranges, making them less migratory. "That's where the Gwich'in come in," Mauer added. "They live on the winter grounds, near the migratory routes. You shrink the range, and you reduce the availability of subsistence hunting for the Gwich'in."

Cronin counters that suspending drilling and major traffic during calving season would go a long way toward minimizing that scenario. "If you just stopped the airplanes, drilling and trucks for one month or six weeks," he said, "you could mitigate a lot of the impact."

THE SPRING WHALE HUNT was nearing its end in Barrow, the northernmost city in North America and the nexus of Eskimo political and economic power. The town (pop. 4,600) is the seat of the North Slope Borough and is the headquarters for the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation. It is also home to some 800 Native American households with a median family income of about $68,000.

By the time I arrived, whaling crews captained by Barrow's most prominent citizens had already brought in a dozen bowhead whales. As I drove through the town's most affluent neighborhood with ASRC vice president of government affairs Oliver Leavitt, himself one of Barrow's leading whaling captains, he pointed to the upper-story cedar decks of several houses, where what looked like signal flags snapped in the breeze. The flags were emblazoned with the emblems

THE INUPIAT SAY THE GWICH'IN ARE CLINGING TO A WAY OF LIFE THAT IS BOUND TO DISAPPEAR.

of the captains whose crew had brought home a whale. Enormous slabs of pale red meat lay neatly stacked in crimson snow alongside one large, attractive home. "They're having a feast here tomorrow," Leavitt said. "It's part of our tradition; it's the communal spirit of the hunt."

Leavitt, 62, is among the most eloquent defenders of the Inupiat's embrace of North Slope oil and the changes it has brought. "We just want our lives to be a lot easier but to still keep our traditions," he told me. "You lose some parts of the culture, but your life is much easier."

He pulled his SUV into Pepe's North of the Border, a Mexican restaurant, an establishment that seems startlingly out of place here above the Arctic Circle. Over chips and salsa, he told me that there was no point in offering resistance when the oil industry set its sights on Alaskan crude back in

Charlie Swaney, with fellow hunters: "Everything we need, nature gives us."

ON A CARIBOU HUNT

The Gwich'in hunters assembled outside Charlie Swaney's cabin before dawn, each emerging from the gloom of the pines straddling a sputtering snowmobile. As the sun cleared the distant ridge and poured golden shafts of light through the spruces, we jolted off, winding our way up through the forest. When we cleared the tree line, the hunters hit full throttle, and we raced across the empty snowfields toward the top of a long, flat mountain.

Once atop the ridge, we killed the engines, and the hunters trained their binoculars across the snow-covered tundra to our east. "Look!" shouted Daniel Tritt, 20, the youngest member of our party, pointing toward a barren ridgeline. A cluster of specks moved through the snow on the far side of the valley. Through binoculars, the animals appeared as a monochromatic tangle of crooked legs and brown-gray flanks against a white, snowy backdrop. The Gwich'in hunters fanned out over the open space to the deafening roar of their snowmobiles. The caribou fled down a gulch.

Adept as they may be at outrunning wolves and grizzlies, the caribou proved no match for swift machines and powerful rifles. The hunters topped the valley wall and came to a halt, dismounting from their snowmobiles. The Gwich'in advanced on the animals, rounds chambered in rifle barrels announcing the imminent assault. By the time the smoke cleared, nine caribou lay dead in the blood-stained snow.

Swaney and his companions set to work gutting the animals, deftly parting skin from muscle with bowie knives. "This is how we get our meat," Swaney said as he plunged both hands deep into the abdomen of a bull to remove its innards. "If the caribou move away, it'll be like having to go 70 or 80 miles to go to the store." Raymond Tritt hovered over another half-dissected carcass, his hands and knife dripping blood. With deeply lined face, hawkish nose and a red bandanna wrapped tightly across his forehead, the longtime hunter had the look of a warrior. "I just love it—the way I am, the subsistence life," he said. "I wouldn't trade it for nothing." —S.W.

the 1960s. "They were going to come and get it whether we liked it or not," he said. "Oil has caused wars. So we decided to join them."

As for the Gwich'in, he said, they made a huge mistake by not relinquishing their aboriginal rights to their land in exchange for federal money and the chance to create a Native for-profit corporation. "Someone has convinced them that the old ways are best, like the time of the buffalo. I don't know where they think they're leading their people." He paused to spear a piece of carne asada with his fork. "The enviros got to them," he said. "They needed someone on the other side that had a brown face."

But tell Sarah James, a member of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, that she's been duped by the Sierra Club, and she will say you don't know what you're talking about. "The environmentalists have every right to speak for the refuge. It's public interest land," she told me. "But they can't speak for us on the human rights issue. We speak for ourselves, and no one can do it better than us."

James, 61, was sitting on a stool in her bright, sunlit Arctic Village kitchen with a knife in one hand and a foot-long fish in the other. The season for grayling had begun in the East Fork of the Chandalar River just beyond the town, and some young men had brought her part of their first catch.

James and other committee members log tens of thousands of air miles a year, speaking at forums and meetings around the world to garner support for the Gwich'in opposition to oil development in ANWR. "We are the caribou people," she tells her listeners, and her people's "spiritual connection" to the caribou makes a human rights issue out of the proposed drilling in the animals' calving ground.

As I took my leave from her cabin, I remembered what her fellow Gwich'in Charlie Swaney had said about the Inupiat. "Why are those people up there in favor of the drilling?" he had asked rhetorically. "Because they're getting money from it. Who else is benefiting? Are we?" I looked around Arctic Village for the last time. Its small, weather-beaten cabins have no indoor plumbing and are heated only by crude wood stoves. Most lack even carpeting on their plywood floors. The roads are washed-out bogs this time of year. Junk heaps of discarded stoves, wrecked snowmobiles and rusted oil drums lie scattered about in the white tundra.

Suddenly, a young man wearing a ball cap and sweatshirt pulled up on a mud-spattered four-wheeler. Did I need a lift, Danny Gemmill asked. I was late for my plane, so I hopped on. After a time, we reached the top of the hill, and he cut the motor. We stood there for a moment, letting the silence and the soothing, muffled roar of the distant river wash over us. "When I'm out in the woods, I just feel like I'm inside the spirit world where I'm free," Gemmill said. He pointed north, out over the top of the spruce trees, over the distant Brooks Range, in the direction of the refuge. "No one knows what will happen if they open it up," he said. "Maybe we won't see the caribou again for 1,000 years." ○

SCOTT WALLACE