2003 Second Place Persuasive Research Paper

Destroying Tomorrow’s Wilderness for Today’s Oil

Section 1: Why I am Opposed to Oil Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Even though I live almost 3000 driving miles away from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), I still oppose its development for oil production. I personally have never traveled to the refuge, and I may never. However, I have visited countless other public land areas and have learned the value of wilderness untouched by human industry. From feeling the spray of Old Faithful in Yellowstone; to hearing the rush of majestic waterfalls in Yosemite; to gazing at the unique red rock formations in Arches; to traveling along the only road that runs through Denali to view rare species of wildlife; I have gained a deep respect for nature’s indescribable beauty. Although I have captured only a small glimpse of America’s pristine wilderness, just knowing thousands of acres lie beyond the tiny areas I have explored makes its worth invaluable to me. I know every acre of wilderness provides a place for people to explore and discover and a place for millions of plants and animals to live and thrive. Considering all I admire in wilderness, there is no reason for me to not care about 1.5 million acres in the 19 million acre ANWR that the Bush administration and other national oil development proponents are fiercely advocating be open to oil development (ANWR).

Section 2: The History of the ANWR

In 1957, the national government reserved twenty-million acres on the North Slope of Alaska in addition to twenty-three-million acres previously reserved in the Naval Petroleum Reserve in Alaska for oil and gas development (Arctic). Three years later, Secretary of the Interior Fred A. Seaton established 8.9 million acres in Northeastern Alaska as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for the “preservation of wildlife and wilderness values” (Arctic, Arctic Wildlife Range 2). He viewed the area as “the only economically feasible opportunity for maintaining a wilderness frontier” considering the “unfolding story of Alaska’s Development” (Arctic Wildlife Range 2).
In 1980, The “Alaska Lands Act” increased the area of the ANWR from 8.9 million to 19 million acres and proposed a thorough assessment of the area’s “oil and gas potential” (Arctic). Seven years later, after intensive “biological baseline studies, surface geological studies, and two seasons of seismic exploration studies,” the Department of the Interior discovered a region of the ANWR along the coastal plain contained oil deposits with a possible yield between 5.7 and 16 billion barrels. They designated the region as 1002 Area, declared it the “most promising” reserve of oil in America, and proposed the national government lease it to oil companies to provide oil for the American economy (Reliable sec 2 ch 5 pg 9). This initial proposition began a controversy that continues today.

Most recently, debates concerning the ANWR have stemmed from proposals in the Bush Administration’s National Energy Plan. With five primary goals, the plan aims to “modernize conservation, modernize our energy infrastructure, increase energy supplies, accelerate the protection and improvement of the environment, and increase our nation’s energy security” (Reliable sec 2 pg xi). However, these five goals are unbalanced. The plan places considerable emphasis on increasing energy supplies and security and less emphasis on conserving, protecting, and improving the environment. Moreover, the plan proposes drilling the oil contained in 1002 Area of the ANWR as one of the primary means to reduce dependency on foreign oil imports. However, the Bush Administration recently stated they would “support an energy bill without a provision to drill in the ANWR” realizing this component is delaying the plan’s congressional approval (Dinesh). Yet, despite the Bush Administration’s consent to remove this proposition from the National Energy Plan, it will likely find its way into another bill in order to strengthen America’s energy independence.

Although the United States does need to minimize dependence on foreign oil, drilling in the ANWR would be a mistake because the benefit of a domestic oil supply does not outweigh the cost of wilderness destruction, and America is capable of increasing independence by turning to other energy sources and conserving more energy.

Section 3: Drilling for Today: A Short Term Benefit

Oil fuels the American economy. It provides energy to generate electricity for homes and businesses and to run automobiles, airplanes, and buses (Regan sec 2). Because Americans rely heavily on oil, they consume twenty-six percent of the world’s oil supply (Wildlands par 4). However, only 40.8 percent of America’s oil
supply comes from domestic sources (Regan sec 3). This means that every day, Americans rely on approximately 11.5 million barrels of imported oil (Wildlands par 3). However, producing more oil from American soil in an attempt to “drill our way out of dependency” is not practical because the ANWR oil supply cannot even meet America’s daily demand (Oil Diplomacy 3). “Peak production” in one day from the ANWR is projected to only be between 1 and 1.3 million barrels while Americans consume almost fifteen times that amount daily (Reliable sec 2 ch 5 pg 9; Wildlands par 3). Therefore, it is improbable that the ANWR reserves can bring about oil independence in America. Furthermore, at its projected 16 billion barrel maximum amount of total recoverable oil, the ANWR oil reserve could only sustain America’s rate of fuel consumption slightly over two years (Wildlands par 3). Drilling the ANWR reserves would only temporarily impact America’s self-sufficiency.

Due to current terrorism concerns, some believe it is important to halt oil imports from the Middle East and begin relying on oil from the ANWR, even if it can only sustain the economy for a few years. By immediately eliminating dependence on countries who support our enemies, many feel America will have greater “energy security” (Reliable sec 2 pg xv). However, most people do not realize oil from the Middle East accounts for only 14.1 percent of America’s total oil supply, whereas, oil from allied nations accounts for 45.1 percent of America’s total oil supply. Thus, by terminating imports only from the Middle East, America will not lose a substantial amount of oil. To fill this minor deficit, America can slightly increase allied imports instead of drilling in the ANWR. Through increasing dependence on allies, America fulfills three of the five goals of the National Energy Plan to “increase our nation’s energy security,” “expand international interaction,” and “accelerate the protection and improvement of the environment” (Reliable sec 2 pg xi).

Some believe that America should not even depend on oil imports from allies and should strive for self-sufficiency through domestic drilling. However, this is not plausible because America possesses only two percent of the world’s total oil supply and will always have to rely on other countries for oil. Yet, energy conservation alternatives alone can lessen America’s dependence on foreign oil imports more than drilling in the ANWR. Primarily, America can increase automobile fuel efficiency. In 2001, America used 13.1 million barrels of oil per day for transportation as opposed to .57 barrels per day for electric needs (Regan sec 2). If
Americans endeavored to drive less, and transportation manufactures developed more fuel-efficient cars, America would not need as much oil. If the standard for fuel efficiency were raised, in ten years, America could save at least 3.65 billion barrels of oil—a total that almost equals the amount of oil that could be extracted from the ANWR (Wildlands 12). Additionally, America can turn to other energy sources to lessen dependency on foreign oil. Instead of directing industrial and technological power to extract oil from the ANWR, America can focus these strengths on developing ways to produce more energy and fuel through solar energy, wind energy, hydro energy, nuclear power, coal, natural gas, and other nonrenewable resources (National Energy Plan sec 22 pg xiii). Because of these many alternatives, it is unreasonable to focus solely on domestic oil production and unnecessarily destroy the ANWR.

Section 4: Destroying Wilderness: The Long Term Consequence

The temporary benefit of a two and a half year oil supply hardly compensates for the environmental damage that it ensues. If the ANWR was opened to oil production, in addition to the actual oil wells, “280 miles of road, hundreds of miles of pipelines, and 50 million cubic yards of gravel” would be needed (Wildlands). Such development would disrupt the natural balance of undisturbed wilderness and threaten the delicate habitats of the ANWR. Natural drainage patterns would change, alkaline dust would build up and alter vegetation patterns, soil would become contaminated from the slightest fuel or oil spill, and the air would become considerably polluted (Arctic). Moreover, development would also endanger the rare species of wildlife living in the ANWR. A majority of the oil wells would be located along the coastal plain, “the biological heart” of the ANWR, where among 261 species of animals, polar bears, musk oxen, wolves, foxes, and dall sheep live year around, and lemmings, caribou, and snow geese migrate yearly (Wildlands; Siy 38-49; Arctic). The pipeline would carry oil directly across the caribou migration path disrupting their migration pattern, and unnatural noises made by oil wells would make snow geese nervous and cause them to fly back and forth over the tundra instead of following their natural migration path. Furthermore, the “loud ‘booms’” typical of oil wells would cause mother polar bears to leave their dens and abandon their nursing young (Siy 56-57). Almost every aspect of oil development negatively affects the environment.
Although domestic oil would boost the economy by reducing the cost of imports, providing a source of domestic revenue, and creating many jobs, there are non-monetary factors to consider (ANWR). The ANWR is not valuable because of the worth of oil under its surface. William H. Meadows, President of The Wilderness Society wrote, “Its value lies in its very wilderness, and wildness is valuable precisely because it is difficult to understand, impossible to capture” (Banerjee 22). If the ANWR is industrialized, it will never be the same. Concerning the Grand Canyon, Teddy Roosevelt once said, “Leave it as it is. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it.” With this in mind, President Jimmy Carter recently wrote concerning the ANWR, “I urge you all to look beyond the benefits of short-term economic gain” (Carter 8). America must realize the meager profit that comes from drilling the oil in the ANWR cannot compensate for the substantial environmental destruction it causes.

If President Bush desires to create a National Energy Plan that “plans for the future, but meets the needs of today…and [protects] our environment,” he would not only remove the proposition of drilling in the ANWR from the National Energy Plan, but also enact a proposition to protect the ANWR from the oil industry (Reliable). The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was not set aside for America to later destroy for a two and a half years of fuel, short-term independence, and temporary economic gain. Rather, it was developed solely to preserve the wilderness for future generations (Arctic 2). Just as I have walked along the same pathways in the forests of Yellowstone my Grandfather did decades ago and have visited wilderness areas he never saw, I hope that in the future, my posterity will be able to visit the wilderness areas I have experienced and the many I have not, especially the ANWR, to see the grandeur of nature unscathed by human industry. We can be selfish and extract the oil in the ANWR for ourselves, or we can be selfless and preserve the habitat of the ANWR for generations to come. As Teddy Roosevelt said concerning the Grand Canyon we must, “keep it for [our] children, [our] children’s children, and for all who come after [us]” (qtd in Carter 8). Oil is temporary. Energy is temporary. However, wilderness is an endless circle of life.


Works Consulted

