

50th Anniversary for ANWR

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50th Anniversary for ANWR

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) threw a party in January to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), the United States' largest and most controversial conservation preserve. Held at the FWS's National Conservation and Training Center (NCTC) in Sheperdstown, West Virginia, the party brought together government officials, wildlife biologists, journalists, and even a former US president.

ANWR holds a special place among US wildlife refuges. Called variously "the crown jewel of wildlife refuges," "America's last great wilderness," and "the Serengeti of the North," the refuge protects 7.8 million hectares in Alaska's northeastern corner, nearly half designated wilderness. It encompasses rugged mountains and broad coastal plains, lichen-covered tundra and grassy meadows, and rushing rivers and sluggish deltas. The refuge is home to 45 mammals, including the world's largest herd of migratory caribou, plus 180 species of birds and 36 species of fish.

President Dwight Eisenhower, following the advice of Fred Seaton, then secretary of the interior, established ANWR in 1960 as the Arctic National Wildlife Range. Protecting 3.2 million hectares, the range was created following years of advocacy and well-publicized expeditions to Alaska by conservationists Olaus and Maddy Murie, biologist George Schaller, and US Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. Later, in 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) added another 4 million hectares and changed "range" to "refuge" in ANWR's name.

From the beginning, however, controversy has dogged ANWR. Alaska business interests and the state's congressional delegation opposed the wildlife refuge's creation and expansion, arguing it would "lock up" a large area with potentially valuable

natural resources. More recently, the US Geological Survey estimated that the refuge's coastal plains overlay as much as 11.8 million barrels of oil that it would be economically feasible to recover. Congress has repeatedly defeated attempts to open ANWR to oil and gas exploration and drilling.

"I wanted a little portion of our planet to be left alone," former President Jimmy Carter told the four-day anniversary symposium at NCTC. Carter, who signed ANILCA into law, recalled, "I spent more time studying maps of Alaska than I did anything else." Apparently, with good results. "I am deeply passionate about that place, despite never having been there," noted Amy Vedder, The Wilderness Society's senior vice president for conservation—an oft-expressed view at the symposium. "It humbles you," she said.

Perhaps that is because ANWR is large enough—almost as big as South Carolina—to harbor not only pristine natural landscapes and endangered species but also an entire intact ecosystem. The vast size, remoteness, and range of habitats combine to create the most biodiverse of US wildlife refuges. "It protects critical habitat and promotes scientific discovery," said Greg Siekaniec, FWS's director of refuges. Here live caribou, moose, musk oxen, and Dall sheep, along with wolves; Arctic foxes; and brown, black, and polar bears. Bowhead and other whales swim the Beaufort Sea to the north. Voles, Arctic ground squirrels, and collared lemmings dwell amid tundra, coastal plains, and grassy meadows. Golden eagles, gyrfalcons, and peregrine falcons patrol the skies.

"ANWR represents a wildlife sanctuary within an intact ecological system that is big enough to allow ecological and evolutionary processes to be preserved," said Roger Kaye, a wilderness advocate and pilot at the refuge. "ANWR is like a time machine that can

transport you back thousands of years to a previous time. It's a world apart, a place where the outside world can be put aside. It evokes a sense of our primeval past."

It is also a place, Kaye adds, where visitors can experience a true wilderness adventure. Only about 1600–3000 people, mostly hunters and fishermen, visit ANWR each year. There are no landing strips for airplanes, no facilities for visitors, and no marked trails to follow. Only one gravel road leads into the refuge. Refuge visitors often face cold, wet weather, even in summer, and risk running into bears and other danger, Kaye says, but "the adventure story that you take with you afterwards is what counts. This is a place for personal exploration and discovery."

ANWR's advocates worry that world unrest and rising demand for oil and gas may reawaken proposals in Congress to allow exploration and drilling along the coastal plains, especially a 607,000-hectare area known as Section 1002, where the 123,000-member Porcupine caribou herd spends the summer and where the pregnant females of that species give birth. Researchers also worry that global warming has already altered climate patterns, melting drifting ice floes that polar bears use to bear young and hunt seals, forcing more of the refuge's largest predators onto land.

"There will be no oil or gas drilling [at ANWR] on this administration's watch," Thomas Strickland, assistant interior secretary for fish and wildlife, told the NCTC symposium. "We are committed to conserving and protecting the American wilderness ethic and to passing along that legacy to our children and grandchildren."

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