



Gwich'in Steering Committee

Attention:
Members of the House
Committee of Natural Resources

From:
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I speak to you today as the executive director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee. And I also speak to you on behalf of my Gwich'in people – for our hunters and fishers, our mothers and matriarchs, our elders and our future generations, and on behalf of the caribou who cannot speak for themselves. We speak with one voice to protect the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge just as we have been since 1988.

And today, I want to thank Representative Stansbury for listening to the voices of my Gwich'in people, and introducing this amendment that would protect the coastal plain – land sacred to the Gwich'in – from the irreversible destruction that would come from oil and gas drilling.

What you call the coastal plain is known to the Gwich'in as 'the Sacred Place Where Life Begins'. This vast landscape is the biological heart of the Arctic Refuge ecosystem and the lifeblood that flows into the plants, animals, and waters that sustain us. It is here that the Porcupine Caribou Herd migrates to each year – just as they have for thousands of years.

The Porcupine Caribou herd is one of the largest and last healthy herds of caribou found in North America. The herd migrates over 1,800 miles across Northern Canada and to the coastal plain in the Arctic Refuge every summer, where they give birth and nurse their calves.

The traditional homelands of my Gwich'in people reach across the boundary of Alaska and Canada. Our relationship with the caribou is a part of our identity – we are spiritually and culturally connected, and have been since time immemorial. Long ago, the Gwich'in followed the caribou to see where they went and to learn their ways. We followed them into the mountains and watched as they went out on to the coastal plain to give birth to their next generation. And we have lived in relationship with the caribou ever since. We made our homes along the migratory route of the Porcupine Caribou, and depend on the herd for our survival today, just as we have for thousands of years. The caribou are a sacred part of our identity as

Gwich'in people. We rely on them for our food, our clothing, our traditions, our tools, and for our connection to the land. They are our history, and we rely on them for our future.

Today, that reliance is more significant than ever before. Impacts from changes in the climate are affecting the Arctic – and much of the lands and waters that the Gwich'in rely on in the North – at twice the rate as the rest of the planet. Our Elders speak of the changes in the land and the populations of wildlife, and those changes speak volumes. We can no longer fish for salmon on the Yukon River. And our fish camps sit empty each summer, depriving us of our rights and our traditions as Indigenous people to subsist off of the land.

No longer being able to fish for our traditional foods already has devastating consequences for us as Gwich'in people, in our ability to express our culture – but it also means that we are now even more reliant upon the Porcupine Caribou Herd to fill our freezers for the winter, to feed our Elders, to live a subsistence lifestyle, and teach our children and grandchildren.

Our traditional knowledge tells us that if you develop in the nursery grounds of the caribou, you destroy the caribou, and therefore, destroy the Gwich'in. That traditional knowledge is backed by western science: many studies of caribou across Alaska and Canada have shown that the herds simply don't "get used to" development. They avoid it, even decades later, especially pregnant females or those that have newborn calves. For our caribou, who calve on the coastal plain, oil development would destroy their birthing places, and alter their routes, threatening their survival.

These impacts will directly impact our ability to hunt caribou, and to sustain ourselves. Just as the caribou cannot simply get used to development and the impacts on their lives, we cannot just 'get used' to the harmful impacts from development on our lifeways. There is no replacing the sacred calving grounds.

This is why the Gwich'in Nation has repeatedly called for protection of the coastal plain. In 1988, we passed a formal resolution opposing oil and gas development in the Arctic Refuge, and we have spoken with a unified voice since. As recent as last summer at the Gwich'in Gathering, we again reaffirmed that resolution calling for the U.S. President and Congress to "recognize the rights of the Gwich'in to continue to live our way of life by prohibiting development in the calving and post-calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd."

Destroying this sacred land is not negotiable. My ancestors stewarded this land, cared for it, and lived in relationship with the caribou since time immemorial. Our future survival depends on protecting the caribou.

We will never stop fighting to protect our land and our way of life.

So today we say Mashi' choo to those who would stand with our Gwich'in people in our fight to protect our caribou that depend on the Arctic Refuge.