

**TESTIMONY OF CHAD BROWN
FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF SOUL RIVER INC.**

**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCES**

**IN SUPPORT OF RESTORING PROTECTIONS FOR
THE ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE AND PASSAGE OF
H.R. 1146, THE ARCTIC CULTURAL AND COASTAL PLAIN PROTECTION ACT**

MARCH 26, 2019

Dear Chairman Lowenthal, Ranking Member Gosar, and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Chad Brown and I thank you for the opportunity for testify in support of protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from destruction through oil and gas extraction. Specifically, I wish to support H.R. 1146, the Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act, recently introduced by your colleague, Congressman Jared Huffman of California, along with over 115 members of Congress. I appear before you today as the founder and President of Soul River Inc, a non-profit organization that aims to share the healing power of rivers with veterans and inner-city youth. I am also a board member of the National Wildlife Refuge Association and they endorse this testimony.

Natural and wild areas literally saved my life, and now my life's mission is to share this love and passion of the outdoor world – specifically for untouched pristine places like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge - with other veterans and underserved youth. But to truly understand why the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge means so much to me, I have to share my story.

Military Service

I am a U.S. Navy veteran who served in Desert Storm and Desert Shield, served at Guantanamo Bay, and saw daily combat during Operation Restore Hope in Somalia. I even served at a NASA research station in Antarctica. To say I've seen a thing or two is an understatement.

The military wasn't always my path, but after two years of art school in Dallas, financial times forced me to look at the military – as it does for so many of America's youth. I joined the Navy because my father was a Navy man and it was really the only branch I knew. I loved serving my country. I believe in the strength, power, and goodness of the United States with every breadth of my being. But after serving in traumatic situations, I, like so many of my fellow veterans, found myself battling demons long after my tours were complete. But more on that in a bit.

Military service taught me that life is fragile and can be taken from you in a heartbeat. It made me value friendship and human interaction. It made me hunger for a world where life is simple and untouched – places like wilderness where man and nature are one.

Life and Near Death After my Service

For a time after I left the Service, things were good. I finished my undergraduate work and got my Masters degree in photography, communications, and design. I worked in New York City's fast-paced advertising and design world. I found myself pitching ideas to people like hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, and doing work for Phat Farm, Simmons' fashion line. I was so busy that I didn't notice the chinks that were developing in my proverbial armor. Meaning, I didn't notice the clear and unmistakable signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

I carried these signs with me from New York to Portland, where the world moves at a slower pace than the craziness of the city that never sleeps. Fortunately, this pace allowed me to breathe. Unfortunately, it also allowed my mind the time to reflect upon what it had experienced years before and for the PTSD to take hold. Over a span of several months, I lost everything.

I lost my job, became homeless, and hit rock bottom. I was selling my blood in order to survive. Do you know how much get selling your blood? \$20. Twenty dollars doesn't go far - and I was one of many veteran in that line every week. One day as I contemplated suicide, I called my mother, knowing I needed help. I was checked into a Veterans Affairs psychiatric ward where I received help - but mainly in the form of drugs. I learned I had PTSD and I tried to cope. It wasn't working.

Finally, one day a friend took me fishing. I hooked a fish - lost it - but then I was hooked. I had smiled for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime.

Eureka

Growing up, the men in my family had been hunters and farmers and my father was an avid camper. My father also spoke extensively about Matthew Henson, one of the first African-American explorers who may have been the first person, black or white, to reach the North Pole. All these men had an influence on my life, which began to be apparent as I became more engrossed in fly fishing.

One day in 2011, as I stood in the middle of a river fishing, it hit me - I needed to share this "medication" with other veterans and with underserved youth. I KNEW that fishing could help other veterans experiencing PTSD and it could also help youth conquer their own challenging issues.

I created a non profit, Soul River Inc. We connect inner city youth and U.S. military veterans to the outdoors through incredible outdoor educational transformation experiences. By engaging veterans as mentors for inner city youth, we believe that rich, powerful opportunities of healing authentically happen in the midst of Mother Nature. We believe that by connecting youth and veterans to our public lands, wild rivers, fresh waters, and beyond through genuine community, we will ultimately establish and inspire a new generation of outdoor leader ambassadors that will advocate for Mother Nature and conservation.

We conduct "deployments" every year where youth are partnered with veterans. These deployments are challenging and require everyone to work together and rely on one another. Everyone involved knows

what it means to be “under threat” - which is one of the reasons we also deploy to places under threat - like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The Soul of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Soul River began doing deployments to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in 2016. We have deployed to the Arctic Refuge five times and are going back this summer. Veterans and underserved youth find meaning, purpose, life, and, most importantly, healing. These qualities make up the soul of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

When you arrive in the Arctic Refuge, your senses are heightened - sight, smell, hearing. You are aware of your surroundings in ways you never knew were possible.

Someone recently asked me what I felt when my feet touch down on the earth of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. All I can say is “home”. It’s more than I feel *at* home, it simply *is* home. It is a place where I am me. I am not a soldier, yet I am. I am not an artist, yet I am. I am all, but I am not. I exist. I am nature and nature is me.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge must be protected for current and future generations of Americans. I fought for my country so that places like this would exist. So that there would be places where I and my fellow veterans and challenged youth can find solace, peace, and healing. A place where man is just a visitor and where natural processes reign. A place where one can find oneself and find the nurturing healing of being in nature and with friends.

The value of nature is far more valuable than any dollars our country may receive from drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. In fact, there is no comparison. Our nation is the wealthiest nation our world has ever known - yet we could be so poor that we might despoil this sacred place forever? Wealth is not always money and I hope that Congress will try to understand that. You must repeal the portion of the 2017 Tax Law that allowed for drilling in America’s truly Last Frontier. You must do absolutely everything in your power to stop this travesty. I beg you - as an American who fought for the freedom of our country - protect our natural resources as you would protect the life of your child. For it is one and the same.

“Medication” Stories from the “Healed”

A few weeks after our 2018 Arctic deployment, I was speaking to one of my friends, a veteran from several of our Arctic deployments named Matthew. He said, “Chad, you know where I am? I’m sitting on the floor of my bedroom with my camp stove making myself a cup of coffee. I need to go back. When are we going back?”

“Soon,” I said, “Very soon.” And we will.

Upon returning from a deployment to the Arctic Refuge, I received phone calls from a few parents. Their kids were not sleeping in their beds - and this was several weeks after returning. They didn’t know how to address what was going on. Even though I knew the parents couldn’t completely understand what their

children were going through without having been to the Arctic Refuge themselves, I tried to explain. I explained that what their children had experienced in the Arctic was extreme - a deep, soul-catching environmental engulfment. Where nature revealed her beauty in the rawest form to their children, and in so doing, opened their minds and souls to what nature is all about. I told the parents to not worry. Eventually they will likely sleep in their beds again but each child is different and each will see the world through a different lens after their experience. What they saw and experienced was special and sleeping on the floor in their bedroom was a way of keeping the Arctic alive in their souls.

I also want to share with you the story of Kolby, a young lady who was one of Soul River's Senior Leaders. She's been to the Arctic Refuge twice and those trips literally changed her life - and that of her family. She got her African American mother, who is in her mid-50s and never thought about conservation, to care about what Kolby cares about - to recycle and be a good steward of the Earth. Kolby is teaching her elders, but she doesn't stop there, she is passionate about teaching new generations as well.

Kolby speaks to classes about her experiences at the Arctic Refuge and invited me to attend one of her talks. I was blown away! She spoke about how important the Arctic Refuge is - for wildlife and for the Gwich'in people. She talked about the wildlife she saw and the fish she caught, but what stayed with Kolby was the Gwich'in. How they depend upon the caribou for survival and how rich and vibrant their culture is. Today, Kolby has joined the U.S. Army and is in the officer program studying to become a surgeon. Kolby wants to find a way in her career path to bring medicine and health to the tribes in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

In closing, I urge Congress to pass H.R. 1146, the Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act and protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge forever for present and future generations of the Gwich'in and all Americans.

Thank you.