

# WILD LANDS IN T



The walls of the conference room at Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, headquartered in Fairbanks, Alaska, are hung with wood-framed photos of “the Founders,” conservation giants whose vision and tireless struggle led to the refuge’s establishment in 1960. More than an effort to protect a specific place, the Founders’ campaign to establish Arctic Refuge was also about recognizing and preserving a set of values—unrestricted natural processes (wildness) and opportunities for exploration and discovery, solitude and challenge—that was later codified in the 1964 Wilderness Act.

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**Left to right:** 1. A mom and three children fetch water at Arctic Refuge. The wilderness provides subsistence opportunities for some native Alaskans. 2. You’ll find no roads or constructed trails within Arctic Refuge. 3. A visitor crosses a river in Arctic Refuge. 4. The Mollie Beattie Wilderness encompasses more than one-third of the total wilderness acreage in the National Wildlife Refuge System.

In the decades since Arctic Refuge was established, issues never imagined by the Founders have emerged. As a kid growing up near Anchorage, Alaska, Arctic Refuge featured prominently in my classroom lessons and family discussions around the dinner table. For me, like millions of others from Alaska to Florida, the persistent national debate about potential oil and gas resources in one small portion of the refuge provided an introduction to the vast world of wilderness, wildlife and cultural resources found in northeast Alaska.

Now, climate change and other large-scale human influences challenge the very notion of “natural,” not only in the Arctic but across the world. And information technology allows for armchair exploration

and virtual experiences that reveal the mountains’ mysteries with a few quick keystrokes.

However, the role of the refuge as a symbol and exemplar of wilderness values has only grown.

At nearly 8 million acres, Mollie Beattie Wilderness, as the Arctic Refuge wilderness is called, encompasses more than one-third of the total wilderness acreage in the National Wildlife Refuge System. It supports such animals as polar bear, wolf, wolverine, Dall sheep and caribou, as well as more than 200 other species of birds, mammals and fish. In addition, the wilderness provides subsistence opportunities for Inupiat and Gwich’in native peoples, who mix

# THE ARCTIC

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traditional and modern lifestyles in villages on the periphery of the refuge.

There are no roads or constructed trails within the wilderness, or anywhere within the larger 19.6 million-acre refuge, an area about the size of South Carolina. Most visitors as well as refuge staff travel by bush airplanes equipped with oversized “tundra tires” for landing on unimproved airstrips. Just getting to the refuge is a multi-day affair; and a typical wilderness visit lasts for a week or more. This challenging travel and access situation limits both recreational visitors as well as scientists and wildlife managers. Despite its attractions as a unique natural laboratory and wilderness recreation paradise, Arctic Refuge receives fewer than 2,000 visitors a year.

The truth is, most Americans will never set foot in Mollie Beattie Wilderness, but many are enriched by the knowledge that it exists. The refuge is a real, tangible place that serves as both habitat and homeland. It is also an intangible and powerful symbol of wildness and wilderness values for people across the country.

The value of symbols lies in their ability to evoke meanings and emotions, and therein lies a principle wilderness stewardship challenge at Arctic Refuge.

As a refuge manager, most of my management tools are designed to evaluate and address the effects of people on wildlife and habitats—but what about the effects of wild places on people? How do we share the refuge with millions who will never visit but also preserve opportunities for personal discovery and exploration? How does one meet legal and policy mandates for managing resources while stewarding the *idea* of a place? These are messy questions that defy easy answers.

Perhaps the best we can do is to frame each question in the context of a larger purpose. Olaus Murie, one of the principal refuge Founders, wrote that preservation of what is now Mollie Beattie Wilderness is about “the real problem of what the human species is to do with this earth.”

I’ll be the first to agree that framing every wilderness choice in such grandiose terms may be a little over-the-top. However,

I do believe that wilderness stewardship demands a thoughtful, humble approach, and our response to the “real problem” identified by Murie is ultimately demonstrated in the cumulative effect of myriad daily decisions.

Many of those decisions involve choices between “could” and “should.” In the Arctic Refuge wilderness, unlike many other refuge settings, we have managed to preserve a functional, wild, natural setting. What we could do in that setting changes as fast as technology; what we should do is governed by a more stable set of rules. The Service’s National Wilderness Stewardship Policy directs us to “set a high standard and provide an example for the public to follow.” That sounds to me like good advice for stewarding a symbolic resource. As a symbol and example for the public to follow, Arctic Refuge, and its wilderness, may be more important to us than we are to it. □

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