



Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska
Emily Sullivan

The Fight for the Arctic Refuge Goes On

Roughly the size of South Carolina, the 19.3 million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska is one of the largest intact landscapes left on Earth. No roads crisscross this stunning expanse of mountain ranges, coastal lands, boreal forests and alpine tundra. And it's abuzz with life: polar bears denning, arctic foxes hunting, musk oxen grazing, birds migrating, and the mighty Porcupine Caribou Herd, nursing their calves.

This sacred place supports human life, too, and has since time immemorial. The Indigenous Gwich'in and Iñupiat peoples have deep and ancient connections to this land and depend on the physical, cultural and spiritual sustenance it provides.

The Threat

As precious as it is, the Arctic Refuge sits on the edge of destruction. From our founding in 1935 to the creation of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in 1960 and ever since, The Wilderness Society has fought for this place, blocking numerous efforts to despoil its fragile, wildlife-rich coastal plain with roads, heavy equipment and drill rigs.

But the stakes increased drastically when a provision in the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act opened the Arctic Refuge to oil and gas leasing. This mandate—which remains in effect—is more than an ecological threat. It is a fundamental human rights violation.

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Dear Conservation Champion,

Together, we have begun to unleash the power of public lands to address the climate and inequity crises.

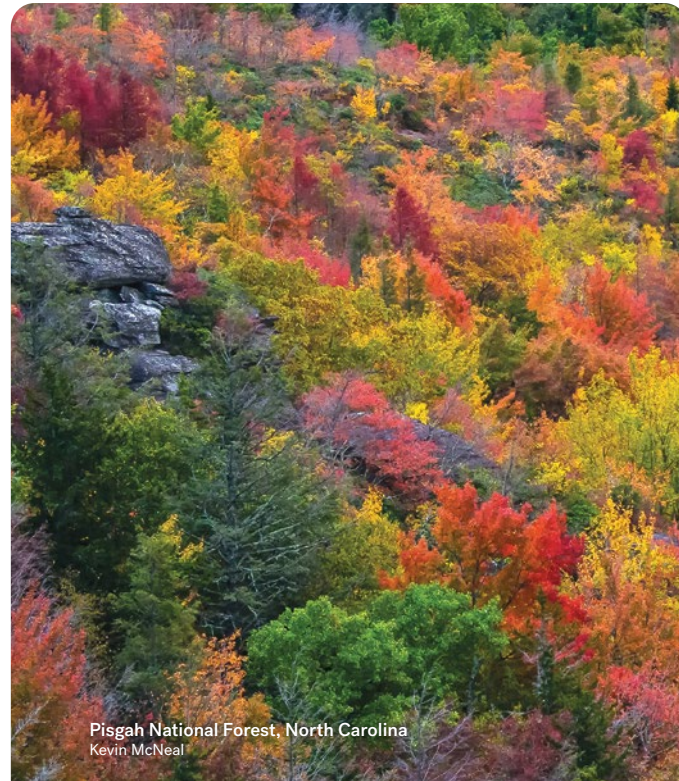
Your support was instrumental in securing passage of the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, which invests an unprecedented \$369 billion to protect public lands, cut U.S. carbon emissions by up to 40 percent by 2030, and advance green energy and environmental justice.

Wilderness Society members like you made this possible. You helped center public lands in the nation's climate agenda, enabled our policy experts to develop and champion key initiatives funded by the bill, and mobilized to win Senate passage of this historic legislation.

While a vital first step, the final bill included provisions that prolong our country's dangerous dependence on fossil fuels. So we will fight on, working with Indigenous and other community partners, Congress and the Biden administration to make public lands an even bigger part of the climate solution.

Thanks to your deep commitment, fierce activism and generous support, I know we will ultimately prevail.

Jamie Williams
President



Pisgah National Forest, North Carolina
Kevin McNeal

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The Wilderness Society recognizes Native Americans and Indigenous peoples as the longest serving stewards of the land.

To learn more visit:
wilderness.org/landacknowledgment



The Wilderness Society meets all standards as set forth by the Better Business Bureau/Wise Giving Alliance.
bbb.org/charity

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DESIGN: Owen Design Co.

Questions or comments? Please send an email to newsletter@tws.org

The Fight

In response, The Wilderness Society joined a powerful coalition under Indigenous leadership to block these efforts. It's an essential battle for their homeland and way of life, and we stand ready to help them defend it. But we also must acknowledge that we haven't always centered people in this fight. Now more than ever, we understand that our work occurs in the context of systemic racism and a history of exclusion. That's why we have begun to correct decades of neglect of the wisdom and rights of Native Alaskans by investing in and supporting Indigenous peoples' leadership in the fight to protect the Arctic Refuge and determine its future.

For three years, the coalition fought to hold our ground. The work paid off when, after taking office in January 2021, President Joe Biden suspended the handful of leases that were unlawfully sold by the Trump administration. Since then, five of the 12 leases sold have been cancelled by the purchasers.

But with Congressional action to rescind the drilling mandate off the table, for now, the fight is far from over. With our partners in the Indigenous-led Arctic Refuge Defense Campaign, we are using every possible tool to prevent desecration of the coastal plain.

The future of this vast, sacred land and its spectacular wildlife depends on us standing with Indigenous communities and supporting their defense of their ancestral homeland.

The coming year will be pivotal in the fight for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Our ultimate goal remains for the Biden administration to cancel the remaining leases and put in place protocols that would make any future development a lose-lose proposition for oil and gas companies.

The Arctic Refuge is one of the world's last places free from development. The future of this vast, sacred land and its spectacular wildlife depends on us standing with Indigenous communities and supporting their defense of their ancestral homeland. It is the right thing to do. And it brings us closer to the goal we share—to secure permanent protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge once and for all.



Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska
Bencio Images

The Imago Initiative



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Conceived by Karlin Itchoak, who is a member of Nome Eskimo community and The Wilderness Society's Senior Director for Alaska, the Imago Initiative brings Gwich'in and Iñupiat peoples together with conservationists and government land managers to explore permanently protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge under Indigenous management.

In its reliance on Indigenous leadership, ways and wisdom, the Imago Initiative is a new approach seeking to protect the Arctic Refuge in a holistic manner based on Indigenous values and worldviews. It aims to support a transition to a sustainable rural economy, away from dependency on fossil fuel extraction, and permanently protect the lands, waters and a way of life for the Indigenous peoples of the region.

With support from many colleagues throughout The Wilderness Society, Karlin began crafting a plan that represented a paradigm shift. "Instead of viewing protected areas as uninhabited landscapes, devoid of human life," he explained, "the Imago Initiative

recognizes Arctic lands as the ancestral home of Indigenous peoples, who have never left, and have inherent, sovereign rights."

In the early days, Karlin established relationships with leaders in Iñupiat and Gwich'in communities, both of which have deep connections to the Arctic Refuge. As interest in this project grew, Meda DeWitt joined the Imago team. Meda is a skilled facilitator of groups using Indigenous methods, a Tlingit Traditional Healer and an ethno-herbalist.

Meda and Karlin formed the Imago Task Force around a nucleus of Iñupiat and Gwich'in leaders in November 2020. The Task Force is a gathering place, a brain trust, a sounding board and a source of information and education about the Imago Initiative for Indigenous communities, allies and partners.

In July 2021, 22 Indigenous and conservation partners met along the banks of the Hula Hula River in the Arctic Refuge on Iñupiat ancestral lands. For eight days,

they lived, listened and learned together, immersed in Indigenous ways. They connected with the land and each other, building trust and transparency. And it was here that they began brainstorming ideas for Indigenous-led land protection and management of the Arctic Refuge.

To inform the Imago Task Force's deliberations, The Wilderness Society commissioned a study of successful Indigenous stewardship models in several countries, including Canada, Russia and South Africa to identify their common characteristics.

The growing reach and reputation of the Imago Initiative was reflected in the participants at the second Summer Retreat, in July 2022, which attracted broader representation from Gwich'in and Iñupiat peoples, including youth and emerging leaders. Senior public lands managers joined the discussions, as did Winona LaDuke, who is recognized internationally for her leadership in advocating for Indigenous control of their homelands, natural resources and cultural practices.

This gathering built upon the existing foundation of trust and open communication, allowing for more robust exploration of new approaches to public land protections that honor Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Going forward, the Imago Initiative Task Force will refine their ideas, and we will work with them as they craft their proposals for action by the Biden administration and/or Congress.



Wilderness Society leaders Meda DeWitt and Karlin Itchoak
Emily Sullivan

"Since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples have lived on and relied on lands that include the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and they still do," said Karlin. "No one has a greater stake in protecting Arctic lands and waters, nor greater experience and knowledge to offer for sustainably managing these lands."



An 18-minute film made during the summer of 2021 provides a rare glimpse into what the Imago Initiative is all about. To view this incredible documentary visit wilderness.org/imago.





Ask a Conservationist

Mo Dailey, The Wilderness Society's Senior Vice President of Conservation Programs and Policy, answers a question submitted by a member of The Wilderness Society.

How does The Wilderness Society form conservation alliances across the spectrum of political differences?

I love this question because it really gets to the heart of what The Wilderness Society does best: uniting people to protect wild places.

We have a strong track record of helping different groups of people, in both urban and rural settings, come together to find common ground and develop plans for public lands that have broad community support. Many of our staff live in the communities in which they work, and they've spent years building deep, lasting relationships with people who have a variety of perspectives, and who all have an interest in how nearby public lands are managed. These relationships are built around education and connection—taking field trips together, unpacking misconceptions and building trust. By taking these steps, we are able to build solutions from the ground up that fit the unique needs of these communities and that rise above deep divisions and partisan politics.

It's an approach that works. Like when The Wilderness Society co-led a national coalition to bring people of all political beliefs together to secure permanent reauthorization (2019) and full funding (2020) of America's largest conservation program, the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

But there is also important work happening in communities that doesn't get national attention. For instance, in Montana, where our staff is facilitating the Gallatin Forest Partnership—a community-led group of local businesses, landowners, hunters, anglers, skiers, mountain bikers, conservationists and others who have worked together for years to arrive at a plan to protect wildlands and maintain existing recreational uses in the Gallatin and Madison ranges. Their plan was recently embraced by the U.S. Forest Service and held up as a great example of effective community engagement in national forest planning.

These are long-term collaborative efforts, often decades in the making. But when we find common ground, enduring progress follows. And you, with your financial support, activism and passion for public lands, make it all possible!



Have a question for the experts?
Submit it to newsletter@twso.org and the answer could be featured in an upcoming issue of *America's Wilderness*.

Nature isn't just a place to visit... it's home.

It nurtures us, feed us and lifts our spirits. It also has the power to protect a sustainable climate, flourishing wildlife, our collective health—and ultimately, our survival. Wouldn't it feel good to return the favor?

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Red Cliffs National Conservation Area, Utah
Michelle Craig



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**Deadline:
Midnight, December 31**