The Preservation of Alaska

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) is sometimes considered the most significant land conservation measure in the history of our nation. This law, signed in 1980 by President Jimmy Carter, set aside 100 million acres of Alaskan land for preservation. ANILCA protected such enormous areas of Alaska that the U.S. National Park system was doubled in size while wilderness land tripled.

From the beginning, Congressman Morris Udall was the champion of ANILCA. He sponsored the first national interests lands amendment in 1970. This precursor to ANILCA was passed in 1971 and helped protect 80 million acres of Alaskan wilderness from commercial development until 1978. (Between 1978 and 1980, President Carter used his executive power to keep these lands from being developed.) In 1977, Congressman Udall introduced the first version of ANILCA. That version passed in the House in 1978. However, the Senate stalled the passing of ANILCA, in large part because, in its original form, it would have permanently blocked oil drilling in the Arctic Refuge coastal plain. Finally in 1979, after more than twelve revisions, Congressman Udall was able to secure passage of the bill through the Senate. President Carter had lost his bid for reelection, but the Senate version of the bill was quickly signed into law before President Reagan came into office. Though the final version of ANILCA was somewhat weaker than the original, this historic compromise was still a remarkable victory.

When I was eight years old I was able to visit Alaska with my family and see many of the places ANILCA had protected. I owe my experiences in Alaska’s wild outdoors to men like Congressman Udall and their steadfast hard work. My family and I spent several days camping in Denali National Park at the base of Mount McKinley. I ate blue berries on the same hillside as grizzly bears, fattening for winter. We saw wolves feeding on a killed caribou and moose walking silently through the forest. With darkness never fully falling, we saw a caribou wander through our camp in the dead of night. My family and I also visited Kenai Fjords National Park, another National Park created under Congressman Udall’s leadership. We took an all-day boat trip where we saw a humpback whale with calf and heard the colossal roar as bus-sized pieces of ice crashed into the ocean from glaciers above. There are no substitutes for experiences like these that fundamentally change how one views the natural world and man’s place in it. Each generation inherits from the last the responsibility to preserve such magnificent landscapes for the enjoyment of all future generations.

Today, 28 years after Congressman Udall won that battle to preserve Alaska’s greatest landscapes, major threats to this fragile Alaskan ecosystem remain. The Bush Administration has repeatedly tried to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling; the most recent attempt coming last month in the Administration’s proposed 3.1 trillion dollar 2009 budget. Udall’s original bill would have designated the entire Arctic National Wildlife Range as wilderness, and it therefore would have been permanently closed to commercial exploitation. Unfortunately, the Senate left out the wilderness designation, and the fate of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has been hanging in balance ever since.
Pressure to drill is now greater than ever; oil prices have topped one hundred dollars a barrel, turmoil in the Middle East has increased the demand for drilling at home, and our addiction to oil is as great as ever. For both economic and environmental reasons, the world is in desperate need of energy alternatives to oil. Without sustainable alternatives to fossil fuels, places like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge may never be safe from drilling. It is my generation’s job to sustain the work done by great men like Morris Udall. Having had the privilege to visit Alaska as a boy, I feel a personal connection to its incredible wild beauty. In my life’s work, I hope to help move our economy toward sustainable energy solutions, thereby helping to ensure the continued protection of such wonderful natural places.

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