

AFN takes a gamble

The Alaska Federation of Natives Board of Directors is on record calling for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to be opened to oil development, to the great disappointment of some of its member organizations. Some who opposed the measure worry about the impact on AFN itself for taking a stance on an issue which engenders such partisan feelings among some to its members. Others deplore what they see as the potential destruction of Gwich'in Athabascan culture, which depends on the Porcupine caribou herd that drops its calves each spring on the coastal plain of the refuge.

This is a deeply complex drama with many surprising twists in its plot and intrigues among its characters. We cannot hope to convey all of our concerns in this small space at this time. However, news of the AFN resolution brought these reflections:

- By far the vast majority of media coverage, local and national, over the last four years, has more completely and sympathetically covered the Gwich'in point of view on the refuge issue. Coverage of the Inupiat position has generally borne the thinly-veiled insinuation that it is a morally flawed, less "authentic" Native position. Lost in the media blitzes are the views of Kaktovik, the Inupiat community located in the refuge which has consistently supported oil development, and arguably has the most to lose if it's shoddily done. If the AFN resolution helps even out the telling of the story, it may be to the ultimate good.

- Oil drilling critics are sometimes given to saying the Inupiat have become pawns, "co-opted" by the oil companies. This insulting brand of rhetoric must be forever dropped from an already sensitive debate. The Inupiat, no less than the Gwich'in, are free and capable of choosing their course, their strategy and their allies.

- It's a tricky thing to take a resolution like this (a *board* resolution passed on a split vote, rather than a resolution of the member passed at convention) and use it in a way that doesn't inadvertently exaggerate its actual mandate. It is an important policy statement, but lacks the luster of unanimity, and falls far short of telling the whole story.

- The recent deaths of hundreds of western Arctic caribou due to causes not yet fully determined casts an unexpected cloud over the refuge debate. It raises the inescapable possibility that global pollution, habitat alteration (such as Canada's Dempster Highway) or other factors may already be undermining the Porcupine caribou. The cumulative impact might be such that oil development would only be the final, insupportable burden that brings on environmental, and cultural, crisis. With prospects like this, there is no better time for a coming together of indigenous—Inupiat and Gwich'in—and western science to assess objectively whether or how such development might safely occur.