

# Gwich'in Steering Committee

*"In no case may a people be deprived  
of their own means of subsistence."*  
International Covenant on Civil and

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## New Report Documents How Drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge Would Violate Human Rights of the Gwich'in

### **Gwich'in Nation's Subsistence Culture and Caribou At Risk if Congress OK's Drilling**

**FAIRBANKS, Alaska** — As Congress prepares for a controversial vote on whether to authorize drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a groundbreaking new report documents how drilling for oil in the birthing and nursery grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd would violate the United States' human rights obligations to the Gwich'in Nation, the native tribe that has lived in the area for thousands of years. "A Moral Choice for the United States: The Human Rights Implications for the Gwich'in of Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge" was released by the Gwich'in Steering Committee, the Episcopal Church, and Professor Richard J. Wilson, Director of the International Human Rights Law Clinic at American University.

"A decision to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge goes beyond environmental or energy concerns," said Professor Richard J. Wilson, Director of the International Human Rights Law Clinic at American University. "International law requires the United States to protect the fundamental human rights of the Gwich'in to their culture, religion, health, and their own means of subsistence."

Because of the impact drilling would have on the Porcupine Caribou Herd, the report documents how opening the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge could deal a serious blow to the ability of the Gwich'in to continue their subsistence culture.

"If Congress and President Bush allow oil companies to drill, it will severely impact the Gwich'in way of life," said Gwich'in elder Jonathon Solomon, Chairman of the Gwich'in Steering Committee. "In Gwich'in villages, caribou provides 60 to 70 percent of our food."

Caribou are essential to the mixed subsistence and cash economy of the Gwich'in. In addition to food, the Gwich'in still use caribou bone for tools, and the sinew and skins for clothing and ceremonial purposes. In far northeastern Alaska there are few regular jobs and most employment is seasonal. Prices are high because, in most villages, most supplies are flown in by small plane.

As a Member State of the Organization of American States, the United States is obligated to protect the rights set forth in the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. The United States is also a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Both of these instruments have been interpreted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (an arm of the Organization of American States) and other bodies to require the protection of indigenous cultures, religions, health, and means of subsistence.

The Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, known to the Gwich'in as the Sacred Place Where Life Begins, is the calving and post-calving home of the Porcupine Caribou Herd. The Gwich'in believe the Creator put them on this land to care for it and the Caribou.

While the Gwich'in enjoy some modern conveniences, their day-to-day lives aren't much different from those of their ancestors who have lived there for thousands of years. The Porcupine Caribou Herd is still at the center of their culture and life, not unlike the relationship between the great buffalo herds and the Plains Indians before the herds were destroyed.

The Coastal Plain is vital calving habitat for the Porcupine Caribou Herd, and researchers have shown that caribou calf survival rates drop significantly when the herd is unable to calve on the Coastal Plain. Research has also shown that oil drilling activity in critical caribou calving areas like the Coastal Plain displaces female caribou and calves from this habitat. Displacement from the best calving grounds could be extremely damaging because of the lack of good alternative calving habitat. In recent years, the Porcupine Herd has experienced a population decline. Adding the stress of opening their prime calving grounds to oil drilling could spell serious, long-term trouble for the herd.

“Protecting the Arctic is important to the Church because it is both an environmental issue and a human rights issue,” said Bishop Mark MacDonald of the Episcopal Church. “For centuries, the Christian Moral Tradition and the Western Legal Tradition have consistently promoted aboriginal rights as a fundamental element of a basic and minimal commitment to justice. We must ask ourselves, will greed triumph over our deepest values as a people? I believe our heritage of faith, freedom, and fairness demands more.”

**About the Gwich'in:** The Gwich'in people live in 15 villages scattered across their traditional homelands in northeastern Alaska and northwestern Canada. Archaeological evidence suggests that Gwich'in caribou hunters have lived in the region for more than 20,000 years. Having survived in the harsh Arctic climate for generations, the Gwich'in Nation, with a population of about 8,000, is now fighting its toughest battle yet: to ensure that Congress does not open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling. For more information, please visit [www.GwichinSteeringCommittee.org](http://www.GwichinSteeringCommittee.org).

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