SOUL OF THE WILDERNESS

Celebrating a Wilderness Legacy

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

BY ROGER KAYE

We will soon celebrate a milestone in American conservation history. The year 2010 is the 50th anniversary of the establishment of a landmark wilderness, and now a symbol of the dilemma we face regarding our effect on the global environment and what quality of it we are to leave future generations—the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR).

ANWR didn't come to us easily. Through the 1950s, powerful economic interests and Alaska's political leaders stridently opposed the proposed 9-million acre (3.6 million ha) wilderness reserve. But after a hard-fought, seven-year campaign and failed legislative attempts, widespread public support persuaded the Eisenhower administration to establish this "Last Great Wilderness" through an executive order with a stated purpose "to preserve unique wildlife, wilderness, and recreational values"—the tangible values for which ANWR is renowned today (U.S. Public Land Order 2214). But beyond perpetuating the wildlife and wildness within its boundaries, there had been another purpose in the minds of those who led the fight.

To understand their underlying motive—and the larger significance of their victory—we need to realize that the ANWR campaign was rooted in a growing fear for the future. ANWR's establishment was among the first of the sweeping conservation initiatives of the 1960s that came about in response to concern over the worsening environmental degradations accompanying the prosperous post–World War II march of progress. The rapid loss of natural landscapes, the destructive logging, mining, and agricultural practices, the spread of pollution and pesticides, and the awesome power and fallout of the atomic bomb: these were among the concerns that were awakening many Americans to a new order of environmental threat. Some even questioned whether future generations would inherit the same Earth. Among them were Olaus Murie, director of The Wilderness Society, and his wife, Mardy, who together led the long struggle.

Roger Kaye in Glacier National Park. Photo courtesy of the author.

Expeditions into Northern Wilderness

This was a team uniquely suited to the challenge. Olaus had grown up in northern Minnesota, hunting and trapping to help support his widowed mother and siblings. These experiences and his early immersion in turn-of-the-century nature literature led him to become a biologist. In 1920, the U.S. Biological Survey, now the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), sent him to Alaska to conduct a detailed six-year study of the territory's caribou herds. In 1924, Olaus married a lively Fairbanks girl, Mardy Thomas, the first woman graduate of the University of Alaska. After a brief ceremony on the remote Yukon River, the couple took off on a 550-mile (887 km) boat and dogsled research honeymoon through the Brooks Range, recounted in Mardy's 1979 classic book, *Two in the Far North*.

During far-flung expeditions throughout Alaska and Canada, Olaus interpreted his keen observations from the combined perspectives of the emerging science of ecology and the transcendental tradition of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. He came to what he described as "a realization of a kinship with all life on this planet" (O. J. Murie

Figure 1—Recreationist along the Canning River. Photo by Gary Wheeler, USFWS.

1961a, p. 15). Olaus's focus became "what I consider human ecology … the importance of nature by which we live—not only physically, but aesthetically and spiritually as well" (O. J. Murie 1961b, p. 61).

In 1956, the Muries led a five-member, summer-long expedition to the heart of the proposed wilderness, the mountain-lined Sheenjek River, the so-called Valley of Lakes (see figures 3 and 4). They arrived as "humble guests," Mardy said, accepting this landscape's intrinsic purpose, that "it is itself, for itself" (M. E. Murie 1979, p. 321). Such was "the spirit of the place" in which their scientific exploration of "the whole ecological ensemble" would be conducted and their impressions of it recorded (O. J. Murie 1958a, p. 10). Their writings established the free-roaming caribou as a symbol of the area's untrammeled natural processes. The wolf came to represent its freedom from human control and subjugation.

But their studies focused on the interrelatedness of all life-forms, not just the large charismatic mammals (see figure 5). Mice and sparrows received their full attention, as did the 23 species of spiders and 40 species of lichens they catalogued. Here was one of the nation's few remaining ecological systems fully intact and large enough for scientific study of how nature functions when left alone. Thus, Olaus argued that it should be kept wild "for our understanding of the natural processes of the universe … which throughout the ages have made this planet habitable" (O. J. Murie 1961b, p. 67).

Wilderness Experiences

Olaus and Mardy Murie believed the area ought to be left unaltered for the unique recreational opportunities it affords, although *recreation* is a wholly insufficient term for the experiences they wanted to be available here.

This should remain an adventuring ground, they believed, the antithesis of the domesticated and convenience-oriented tourism that national parks were promoting at the time. Visitors could come to experience the conditions that helped shape our national character (see figure 6). They could explore and discover, experience freedom and self-reliance, and confront challenge, even hardship. "For those who are willing to exert themselves for this experience, there is a great gift to be won," Mardy wrote, "a gift to be had nowadays in very few remaining parts of our plundered planet—the gift of personal satisfaction, the personal well-being purchased by striving" (M. E. Murie 1960, p. 60).

Within the area's silent vastness, absent the reminders of civilization, the Muries also experienced the gift of true solitude. They found peace, wholeness, and restoration, and through them, transcendent insight. This was one of those places, as Olaus

Figure 2—Schrader Lake, deep within the ANWR wilderness. Photo courtesy of the USFWS.

Figure 3—The Sheenjek River is a designated Wild River and one of approximately 40 pristine rivers within the ANWR. Photo courtesy of the USFWS.

Figure 4—Last Lake, in the ANWR. Photo courtesy of the USFWS.

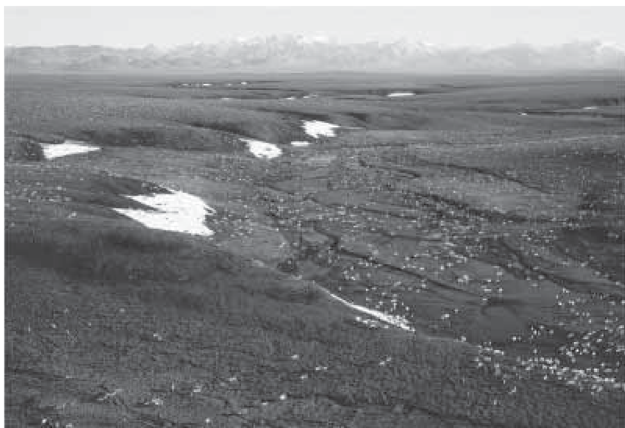

Figure 5—An aggregation of 80,000 caribou on ANWR's coastal plain. Photo by Fran Mauer.

said, "to contemplate and try to understand our place in the world" (O. J. Murie 1959, p. 18).

Wilderness Philosophy

At the time, Olaus and his partner at The Wilderness Society, Howard Zahniser, were working to enact what would become the 1964 Wilderness Act. Beyond the practical benefits of providing for recreation and protecting wildlife, habitat, and scenery, they believed areas set apart as wilderness would serve another increasingly important need. As Zahniser summarized it, "We deeply need the humility to know ourselves as the dependent members of a great community of life." He explained that "to know the wilderness is to know a profound humility, to recognize one's littleness, to sense dependence and interdependence, indebtedness and responsibility" (Zahniser 1956, p.40).

Thus, when Olaus declared that "we human beings need to muster the wisdom to leave a few places of the earth strictly alone" (O. J. Murie 1958b, p. 31), he meant preserved for reasons beyond the uses and benefits that wilderness areas might provide us. They were also to be left there for themselves, as touchstones to that better part of ourselves that holds reverence for something beyond human utility.

Preservation of this place would be a gesture of humility, an encouraging demonstration of our willingness to accept restraint and limit our effect on the larger community of life. Its establishment would affirm our capacity to rise above the commodity orientation that has come to dominate our relationship with nature—an orientation obscuring our embedded role in the community of life and ultimately, underlying all our environmental threats.

"This attitude of consideration and respect," Mardy wrote, "is an integral part of an attitude toward life, toward the unspoiled, still evocative places on our planet" (M. E. Murie 1979, p. 289).

The Arctic wilderness of ANWR exemplified the natural qualities the Muries, Zahniser, and others sought to protect in the 1964 Wilderness Act. As well, its purpose embodied their larger hope for the wilderness concept—that it might stimulate Americans to think beyond conservation of resources to the protection of whole ecosystems, and beyond that, to rethink their relationship to the larger biosphere we jointly inhabit. It's the reason that, over and over, through their writings and testimonies, the ANWR founders placed their advocacy for this wilderness in the larger context of the globe, the planet, the world, and the Earth.

As Olaus and Mardy Murie (see figure 7) intended, the struggle over the future of this distant place did become emblematic of the larger contest between competing views of the appropriate relationship between postwar American society and its rapidly changing environment. But the question their generation resolved has reemerged to confront ours: Which notion of progress should this again-contested landscape represent? Should it be the idea of progress underlying the prevailing rush toward attaining an ever-higher material standard of living? Or should it represent the emerging biospheric perspective emphasizing sustainability and calling for restraint? Controversy over this area's future began as—and is again—emblematic of "the real problem," as Olaus Murie characterized it, "of what the human species is to do with this earth" (O. J. Murie 1960).

Today, we again face a new order of environmental threat. Increasingly, scientists warn of a non-analog future, a "perfect storm" convergence of global energy and resource scarcity, climate change, and widespread environmental alterations. "The real problem" Olaus spoke to is upon us. And again, ANWR serves as a point of reference for rethinking our national conservation policy. It has come to symbolize the question of where we will draw the line on our profligate energy use and unsustainable behavior toward nature. Its inviolate boundary lines continue to serve as heartening affirmations of the boundaries American society is willing to place on its consuming quest for more consumption and an ever-higher standard of living. ANWR remains the finest example of the wilderness that serves, in Wallace Stegner's phrase, as "our geography of hope" (Stegner 1980, p. 17).

And that's the reason millions who will never visit ANWR find satisfaction, inspiration, even hope in *just knowing* it's there.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of ANWR, let's remember that ANWR represents the sense of obligation a past generation felt toward the future. Let's remember that we inherited not only this remarkable place, but that same obligation to think beyond ourselves—to think of those people and creatures, of the present and future, here and everywhere—with whom we share this conflicted globe.

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Figure 6—A hunter overlooks the Canning River Valley. Photo by Roger Kaye.

Figure 7—Olaus and Mardy Murie at Last Lake, Sheenjek River Valley during their 1956 summer-long exploration of the proposed refuge. Photo by George Schaller.

Figure 8—Floaters on the Sheenjek River. Photo by Andrew Weik.