



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUBHANKAR BANERJEE

As the political controversy over the future of Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge reignites, a journey across **ANWR**'s disputed territory explores the where wildlife, native traditions, and the search for oil converge in fa

SPRING MARCH: THE PORCUPINE CARIBOU HERD MIGRATES TOWARD ITS CALVING GROUNDS IN THE 1002 AREA OF THE ARCTIC REFUGE'S COASTAL PLAIN, MAY 2002.

BY PETER MATTHIESSEN

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ON AN EARLY MORNING flight to Arctic Village in northeastern Alaska last July, our airplane crossed the forested White Mountains to Fort Yukon, at the confluence of the Chandalar and Yukon rivers, north of the Arctic Circle. From there we flew across the roadless barrens of the Gwich'in reservation, ascending the East Fork of the Chandalar and the caribou-tracked southern foothills of the Brooks Range, on the first leg of an expedition into the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Arctic Village is an assembly of 40-odd spruce-log cabins that overlook the serpentine bends, oxbows, and channels of the East Fork. More than a hundred miles from the nearest road, it was settled by the formerly nomadic Gwich'in because its forest and river provided timber for fuel and shelter, furred animals, and abundant fish. More important, it is winter range for varying populations of the vast Porcupine caribou herd, an estimated 123,000 strong. Drifting across the mountains from their summer breeding grounds in the Arctic Refuge on the coast of the Beaufort Sea, the caribou move south and east into the Porcupine River drainage and Canada's Yukon Territory, where most of the animals overwinter. The 15 Gwich'in villages in northeastern Alaska and northwestern Canada, which include about 7,000 people, are scattered along the caribou migration route, and each family needs eight to twelve animals to provide sufficient dried meat and hides to feed and clothe it through the long, hard winters.

In 1971, Arctic Village and Venetie, a Gwich'in village 70 miles to the south, chose not to participate in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The act was offering nearly \$1 billion and 40 million acres to settle indigenous land claims for those tribes that accepted oil development and the construction of the Trans-Alaska pipeline, which carries crude oil 800 miles south from the Arctic coast by way of Fairbanks to the huge tankers at Port Valdez. Refusing the money, the two villages held out for the original tribal land claim of 1.8 million acres established under the Indian Reorganization Act, which was amended to include Alaska in 1936. Their brave commitment to the integrity of their ancestral lands has limited these Gwich'in to a life of bare subsistence, yet seen from the air, the solid cabins built among the conifers show a strength of spirit that is evident in the calm presence of Evon Peter, the young village chief, who came to

greet our plane on the gravel airstrip.

Peter, a slight, handsome man of 26 who recently earned a B.A. in Alaska native studies from the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, gazed around his mountain country as if inviting me to appreciate it with him in the few hours I had to spend walking the village. "We're certainly one of the poorest tribes," Peter said, "yet we're also rich, for we have our unspoiled original land, and we have our language and our traditional way. We want to remain independent as far as possible; we want sustainable energy, solar power."

We crossed the village and climbed a hill to visit Sarah James, the Gwich'in spokeswoman for the Arctic Refuge. She greeted us from the doorway of her house. "Yes! We got plenty of good food here! Better come help eat it!" said Mrs. James.

57, a friendly, bespectacled person rounded out by a full life. "King salmon from the Yukon—that's the best there is!" She waved us through her door ahead of the mosquitoes, bustling back to her small stove to put the last touches on a fine, big feed of salmon and caribou stew.

For many years, Sarah James has spoken out against development in the refuge. "I only repeated what Indian people have always said about land and life, but this time we got heard because of the big fight over our caribou and their breeding ground," she said. The caribou have sustained the Gwich'in culture for many thousands of years, and the annual coming of the big deer is so critical to Gwich'in economy and cultural well-being that the distant region of the coastal plain where the caribou are born is revered as *Vadzhah Goojii Vi Dehk'it Gwanlii*—roughly, the Sacred Place Where Life Begins—a near-mythic area that few Gwich'in have ever seen. In Mrs. James's girlhood, the Gwich'in still had hunting camps on the braids of the Chandalar River to harvest the caribou moving through. "How to hunt and fish—that's the only life we know," she said. "That's the only food we have, so we don't want to lose it."

ARCTIC VILLAGE WAS THE starting point for an expedition into the Arctic Refuge on which I had been invited by Subhankar Banerjee, an enterprising 35-year-old conservationist and photographer from Calcutta, India. Subhankar has spent the last two years engaged in a documentary project to help rally support against oil exploration and drilling in the refuge. Departing Arctic Village on July 13, 2002, we would make a ten-day camping trip down the Kongakut River through the refuge's remote northeastern region, from the north slope of the Brooks Range



