Case

Oil and the Caribou People

Ron Blanchard had eagerly accepted the invitation from Bill Sanders. As head of social ministries at church headquarters, Bill had invited Ron to represent the church and society committee of their denomination at the clan gathering of the Gwich'in people during mid-June in northeastern Alaska. Ron had never been above the Arctic Circle in mid-summer. The prospect of visiting such a remote place and learning more about Native American culture seemed like high adventure and something good for his social-studies teaching at Western High School in Seattle.

Now that the trip was over, he had to produce a report on the gathering for the church and society committee. Bill Sanders had also asked for Ron's recommendation on proposed oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) on the north slope of Alaska's Brooks Range adjacent to the Gwich'in reservation. Bill indicated that sixteen other religious organizations and thirty-two Native American groups had already endorsed Gwich'in opposition to the drilling. The Gwich'in, it seemed were interested in gathering further support and so had invited Bill to send a representative.

The Gwich'in are Athabascan people with a population in the range of five to seven thousand. They live primarily in northeastern Alaska and northwestern Canada. Legend and archeological evidence support a long human presence on the lands now inhabited by the Gwich'in. Traditionally, the Gwich'in roamed the boreal forests of the region as hunter-gatherers in bands of six to eight families. They lived a harsh life in an unforgiving land with cool summers and long, frigid winters when starvation was an ever-present danger.

Over the last century this rigorous way of life has radically changed by a regrouping in larger social units in small villages. The arrival of the

This case and commentary were prepared by Robert L. Stivers. The names of all persons and institutions have been disguised to protect the privacy of those involved.
Episcopalian missionaries, the building of schools, and the acceptance of modern technology, in particular the rifle and snowmobile, hastened these changes. Ron learned that Gwich’in opposition to oil exploration stems from the threat they perceive to their main source of subsistence, the Porcupine Caribou Herd, and to the culture and spirituality they have developed in relation to the herd. The Porcupine Herd, with approximately 123,000 animals, is one of the largest herds of caribou in the world. It winters south of the Brooks Range on Gwich’in lands. In spring a great migration takes place. First the females and then the males trek through the passes of the range onto the north slope, where calving occurs almost immediately, reaching its peak in early June.

The herd migrates to the north slope to take advantage of the rich tundra vegetation in the brief but fertile Arctic summer; to avoid its natural predators, who seldom venture onto the slope; and to gain respite from the hordes of mosquitoes in the winds off the Arctic Ocean. Beginning in late summer the herd makes its way once again south of the range and disperses across Gwich’in lands to endure the winter.

For centuries the herd has been the primary source of food for the Gwich’in’s subsistence economy. The Gwich’in have harvested animals from the herd in substantial numbers and developed a culture closely bound to the herd and its migration patterns. The herd continues to do well in this habitat. The Gwich’in, in turn, have survived as a people, though not without considerable hardship. To prepare himself for the trip, Ron had read scientific reports on the potential effects of petroleum development in ANWR and an anthropological study that described the ancient ways of the Gwich’in. The scientific reports on the Porcupine Caribou Herd were inconclusive, Ron thought. Its numbers had declined in recent years due to natural causes, not oil production. Thirty years of oil drilling at Prudhoe Bay had apparently done no harm to the smaller Central Arctic Herd, whose range included the production facilities. In fact, the herd’s numbers had increased in recent years for reasons that eluded scientists. Nevertheless, scientists were concerned. The parts of ANWR slated for drilling, the so-called 1002 lands, were among the best feeding grounds for the caribou. Would the caribou of the Porcupine Herd seek other, less nutritious feeding grounds more populated with predators? One thing the reports made clear was that reproductive success depends on summer weight increase and avoidance of predators. The scientists urged caution.

From the anthropological study Ron learned about the traditional nomadic way of life of the Gwich’in, their main food sources, and their relation to the caribou. He understood intellectually their concern for the loss of both their primary food source and their traditional culture. He was not prepared by his study, however, for the degree to which their traditional culture already seemed to be in jeopardy, something he learned after arrival at the clan gathering. He was not sure he understood enough about these people, the technology of oil, or the ecology of the north slope to make a recommendation on drilling in ANWR. To make any recommendation might well be an exercise in disinformation, harmful to meeting the nation’s energy needs, or worse, harmful to these people who had so kindly hosted him for five days.

Throughout his stay during the clan days, Gwich’in tribal elders had been eager to recount the old days and their experiences. Barbara Frank, whose age was difficult to judge, but who looked to be in her seventies, told about the old days and of summer movements in small family groupings. The warm days added nuts, berries, and fruit to their steady diet of moose and small animals. In winter she remembered a harsh life in crude shelters and a diet of caribou and whatever other animals trapping produced. She expressed in deeply spiritual terms the close relationship of her people to the caribou. Although she spoke with nostalgia, she never once urged that the modern comforts of the village be abandoned for a return to the wilderness.

Another elder, John Christian, remembered the coming of the missionaries and the schools they established. He related how his parents and grandparents were attracted to the village that grew up around the church and school. They were fascinated by the new technologies that added a margin to subsistence in the Arctic and by the amusements that brought variety and diversity. His family was subsequently baptized. They abandoned their given names for Christian names and assumed the superiority of the new and the inferiority of the old.

Alongside these private conversations were daily public gatherings with starting times that baffled Ron. It was confusing to have no schedule, no appointed time to begin. Things just happened. The sessions began when the spirit moved and ended when there were no more speakers. Other more experienced visitors dismissed his confusion as “Gwich’in time.” There was no set agenda. An elder kept order and transferred to each speaker the large decorative staff that conferred the right to address the assembly.

The general topic for the first public gathering was oil exploration in ANWR. Moses Peters, an important tribal elder, spoke in English and presented his assessment of the situation. He reviewed existing production procedures at Prudhoe Bay and the shipment of oil through the Alaska pipeline. He claimed that operations at Prudhoe Bay had adversely affected the smaller Central Arctic Caribou Herd that summered in the vicinity. He acknowledged the increase in the size of the herd but dismissed it as normal fluctuation. The herd, he asserted, was reluctant to cross the pipeline and did not graze in the vicinity of the wells.
Moses went on to say that the oil companies expect their next big find will be in ANWR. He feared that the one hundred miles of pipeline, four hundred miles of roads, the gravel pits, the production facilities, and the air strips would seriously disturb the migration routes of the Porcupine Herd at a crucial time in its annual cycle. "Caribou survival," he insisted, "depends on being born in the right place at the right time, and all of the caribou depend upon these summer months on the north slope to rest and restore food reserves. It is this period of predator-free resting and feeding that prepares the caribou to reproduce and to survive the winter. I know the oil companies have improved their drilling techniques, but I am still worried."

Moses handed the staff to his daughter, Mary, who added: "Oil waste and the burn-off of natural gas would contaminate the tundra. The caribou would not be able to eat." She concluded with alarm: "We will starve again, as it happened before, but this time it will be worse."

Mary returned the staff to her father, who concluded by saying that they needed to continue to press for the permanent protection of ANWR. "The refusal of the US Congress over the last few years to pass energy legislation that includes developing ANWR for oil is not enough. The oil companies are keeping the pressure up. They are arguing that terrorism and dependency on foreign sources of oil, especially in the unstable Persian Gulf, necessitate opening ANWR. Now that the price of oil has increased, as supply dwindled in coming years, gas-hungry Americans will make known their demands for new sources of supply. Environmentally conscious members of Congress may not be able to withstand all this pressure. We must get permanent protection now. The caribou is our main source of life, our very survival. We can’t live without the caribou. All our traditional skills, our whole way of life, will be lost if there are no caribou."

Ron was impressed by the sincerity of these appeals and the efforts of the Gwich’in to secure reliable scientific evidence. He was troubled, however, by some of their conclusions. He also recalled his conversation with Glen Stone, a friend who worked as an engineer at Northern Oil. They had discussed the issues prior to Ron’s departure for Alaska. Glen had talked about his own involvement on the north slope at Prudhoe Bay. He painted a rosy picture of the benefits of oil production to all Alaskans. "Oil money," he said, "builds schools, roads, and other public works projects. It keeps personal taxes low and enables the government to pay each resident a yearly dividend. The Native Americans benefit too, perhaps most of all."

Glen went on: "Production at Prudhoe will not continue forever. We need ANWR to maximize our investment in the pipeline and to keep those benefits rolling to Alaskans. Northern Oil geologists say they can technically recover sixteen billion barrels of oil. The US Geological Survey, basing its numbers on what is economically recoverable, has much lower, but still considerable, estimates. There is a lot of oil there, enough for nearly a year’s worth of US consumption. Why lock up such a valuable resource? As for ecological, concerns of the environmentalists and Gwich’in, I think they are wrong about the effects at Prudhoe. The Central Arctic Herd is in fine shape. Modern construction and containment techniques minimize negative environmental impacts. Believe me, we take great precautions. The Gwich’in have little to worry about."

Glen continued by pressing one of his favorite themes, the coming energy crisis. "Oil, gas, and eventually even coal will be so expensive in the future that we will have to switch to alternatives. Appropriate alternatives are not in place and will require considerable development. In the meantime, we will need all the fossil fuels we can get our hands on. Otherwise, production of goods and services will decline and unemployment increase. It won’t take long under those circumstances to unlock ANWR. We can be patient; it’s just a matter of time."

Glen ended the discussion by pointing out that other native groups in Alaska, in particular the Inupiat on the north slope, have far fewer problems with exploration than do the Gwich’in. He wondered aloud why the Gwich’in were so troubled but offered no opinion since he had not been in contact with them. Ron wondered too, especially about Glen’s evaluation of the scientific evidence at Prudhoe and his claim that oil revenues had benefited groups such as the Gwich’in.

As the days of talk continued, Ron thought he detected something deeper at work. Oil exploration seemed to be symbolic of the invasion of modern technology and the threat it presented to traditional Gwich’in culture. It was an obvious enemy: alien, capitalist, consumer-oriented, and potentially destructive to the environment. What really seemed at issue was Gwich’in identity.

The little that was said about oil exploration after the first day seemed to support this conclusion. Instead, the question of identity dominated public sessions. Speaker after speaker decried the erosion of Gwich’in culture. Some in prophetic voice condemned the erosion outright. Others reflected their own personal struggle to preserve the best of the traditional culture while adopting chunks of modern life.

The speakers focused their concern on language. Mary Peters reported through a translator that in some villages only 20 percent of the children understand the Gwich’in language. She was troubled that the local schools taught English as the primary language and, worse, that some schools ignored native language altogether. For the most part she herself did not speak in English, believing that speech in her native tongue was a mark of integrity.
As he thought about it later, Ron certainly agreed that language was crucial. But the matter seemed to run still deeper. He reflected on the one school in the village that was hosting the clan gathering. It was by far the largest, best-equipped, and most modern structure in the village. Built by the state of Alaska with money from oil royalties, its facilities were state of the art. Villagers could not avoid making comparisons between it and their own humble dwellings.

Even Ron, a total stranger, made the comparison, although he had not taken the time during the meeting to explore the implications. As he thought about it later, it seemed odd that Gwich’inn from other villages and non-Gwich’inn like himself were not housed in the school but were put up in make-shift tents. He thought about his own backpacking tent and the mosquitoes that were so big villagers were said to build bird houses for them. How much easier it would have been to lay his pad on the floor of the school, away from the swarms of mosquitoes and in easy reach of flush toilets and showers. How much easier indeed! He too could understand the attractions of modern technology.

Ron’s reflections returned to the village itself and the things he had observed while hanging out and wandering around. Snowmobiles, while out of use for the summer, were everywhere in storage. Satellite dishes for television reception were common. The table in the laundromat was covered with glamour magazines. The teenagers roamed the village in groups without apparent direction, much like teenagers roam malls throughout North America. Joy riding and kicking up dust on big-tired, four-wheeled vehicles was a favorite pastime.

Perhaps the most obvious symbol of all this was the five-thousand-foot gravel runway that ran like a lance through the center of the village. As the place where visitors, fuel, mail, and supplies entered, it was the symbolic center of town, he reflected.

Although wary of his untrained eye, Ron concluded that the matter of oil exploration on the north slope was also a matter of the invasion of an alien culture and ideology. Yes, saving the caribou herd was important. Yes, teaching the kids the language was also important. But the deeper questions in these deliberations seemed to be, How can caribou and language survive the onslaught of modern technology and thought? How can a traditional people maintain its identity when much that is attractive to them comes from a more powerful and alien culture and seems to make life easier and more interesting? The problem for the Gwich’inn was not just the oil on the north slope. It was also the school, the runway, the motorized vehicles, the glamour magazines, and maybe even the churches.

The Gwich’inn gave the last days of their gathering to stories of flight and return. A procession of witnesses including Mary Peters testified to the horrors of migration to the outside. Lost identity, alcoholism, drug addiction, a final bottoming out, and then a return to roots were common experiences. For each witness, Ron wondered, how many were lost in the bars of Fairbanks?

Ron had been impressed with the integrity of those who testified. They were no longer innocent about modern culture. They seemed to have returned much stronger for their trials and with a healthy respect for their traditions, the land, and the ambiguities of their situation. Perhaps these survivors and their children were the hope for a future that would be both easier and more satisfying. Maybe a new and stronger identity was being forged right before his eyes. He was moved to tears by Mary Peters’s concluding remarks, this time in English: “It is very clear to me that it is an important and special thing to be Gwich’in. Being Gwich’in means being able to understand and live with this world in a very special way. It means living with the land, with the animals, with the birds and the fish as though they were your sisters and brothers. It means saying the land is an old friend and an old friend your father knew, your grandmother knew, indeed your people have always known... We see our land as much, much more than the white man sees it. To our people, our land really is our life.”

Ron’s attention turned to the present and his report and recommendations to the church and society committee. Should he merely report what he had seen and write in pious, uncritical generalizations? Despite his ignorance as an outsider, should he try to state his misgivings about what is happening to this alien but very rich culture? Should he accept Glen’s optimistic assurances about environmental impacts and the benefits or mention the Fairbanks taxi driver who condescendingly observed that the controversy over ANWR was so much Indian smoke and mirrors to exact higher royalties from the oil companies? Should he recommend that the church support further oil exploration on the north slope or take up the cause of the Gwich’inn, feeling as he did that more was going on with these people than the dispute over exploration? And how should he factor in his own strongly held attitudes about social justice for traditional peoples and his conviction that Americans were consuming far too much energy in the first place?
Commentary

Under similar conditions fifty years ago North Americans would have ignored this case. Led by oil companies and backed by federal, state, and local governments, they would have moved in to tap the resource with little hesitation. They might even have done to the caribou herd and the Gwich’in what they did to the buffalo and the Plains Indians. The Gwich’in would have been silent, and observers such as Ron would have noted little out of the ordinary, much less questioned their powers of discernment.

Today corporations and government are often more sensitive, a new breed of environmentalist is crying for the preservation of species and ecosystems, the Gwich’in are speaking out, and observers are questioning their own assumptions. Oil demand remains high, however, and with the depletion of reserves this demand may have the last word.

AN ETHIC OF INTEGRITY

To understand this case, a new appreciation of an old virtue, integrity, is helpful. The word integrity comes from the Latin *tangere*, meaning “to touch.” The past participle of *tangere* is *tactus*. Add the preposition *in*, and the English word *intact* emerges. Further consideration yields other relevant related words such as *integration* and *integer*.

The Christian tradition speaks of the immanence of God, of the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ and continues to relate to the world through the Spirit. In an ethic of integrity, God is the power of integrity that creates and sustains in three distinct but related dimensions of existence: (1) personal integrity, (2) social integrity, and (3) nature’s integrity. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of God’s power of integrity and points to the experience of inner wholeness or integration that is God’s primary work with humans.

Personal integrity, the first dimension, involves an inner harmony that is the foundation and source of inspiration for an outer harmony that seeks a consistency between act and intention. God’s integrating power of love creates internal harmony in the self when the self is receptive. This internal harmony also creates the spirit and will to respond with love and justice. The relationship of God and the self that produces internal harmony is called faith. It empowers and frees the self to act in accordance with intentions.

For Christians, intentionality is informed by norms derived from the Bible, the traditions of the church, and the personal experience of the Spirit. Sin is the power of disintegration that blocks integrity. Sin results from the refusal of the self, others, or the community to receive the power of integrity and is experienced as something done to a person or something the person does willfully. The continuing power of sin prevents the full realization of integrity. The presence of God in the midst of sin provides the resources for partial integrations and the assurance that the full realization of integrity is God’s final aim. Integrity is dynamic, something that is partially realized, lost, to be hoped for, and received again.

Personal integrity is part of Mary Peters’s reluctance to speak English in the public gatherings. She apparently sees speaking in her native tongue as an important element in the reinvigoration of Gwich’in culture and wants to match her words and deeds.

Ron Blanchard’s personal integrity is also an issue in this case. Given his limitations as an observer, how is he to report his experience and make recommendations so that his intentions for the well-being of the Gwich’in, his own society, and the Porcupine Caribou Herd are realized?

Finally, personal integrity is a matter for everyone. In this case it involves knowledge of the issues, accurate understanding of the history of Native Americans, and sensitivity to finding one’s way in a different culture.

Social integrity, the second dimension, is the harmony of act and intention in a community. Communities have integrity when peace and justice are foundational ethical concerns. While communities have fewer resources than individuals for receiving and acting on the power of God’s integrity, peace and justice are deep wellsprings. To the Greeks, justice was the harmony of a well-ordered community where equals were treated equally, unequally unequally. For the Hebrews, *shalom* and righteousness resulted from keeping the covenantal relation with God and following the guidelines of the law. They included a special concern for the poor. For both Greeks and Hebrews, peace and justice fed on each other and together nourished social integrity.

Christians melded Greek and Hebrew traditions, emphasizing basic equality in Christ and seeing in the person of Jesus the model and power for both peace and justice. These understandings of peace and justice have developed further in Western traditions with the norms of equality and freedom. Persons should be treated equally and left free unless some ethically justifiable consideration justifies a departure from equality or freedom. Such departures, when adequately justified, are called equity.

From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came the notion of rights as a further development of the norm of justice. Rights are a human way of giving greater specificity to equality and freedom. One of the best examples
is the Bill of Rights found in the US Constitution. At first only a few enjoyed rights. As time went on, rights were extended to ever more groups, for example, minority groups and women. Today some would extend the concept of rights to animals and plants. So, for example, animals have a right to be treated with care and the right to have a clean habitat. In the thinking of those who maintain that animals have rights, the caribou in the case have a right to their feeding grounds in ANWR.

While peace and justice are the spiritual and ethical foundation of social integrity, they presuppose the provision of sufficient consumption. The equal sharing of poverty can be as disintegrating as war and injustice. The definition of basic sufficiency is notoriously difficult, of course. Clear in the extremes of absence and excess but vague at the margins, the concept of sufficiency is useful for setting floors to poverty and discriminating about levels of consumption. As the commentary on the case “Rigor and Responsibility” makes clear, the norm of sufficiency establishes a floor below which a just society does not let its members fall. On the upside, it calls into question nonsustainable consumption and efforts to justify environmentally destructive consumption. Sufficiency applies to plants and animals as well. They too need what is necessary to sustain their evolutionary trajectory.

Basic also to peace and justice are elements of a common culture. No society can long remain integrated without some minimum of shared understandings, symbols, values, and traditions. A culture can become so fragmented by invasion from without or conflict within as to lose its identity.

A consideration of social integrity is central to this case. From the side of the Gwich’in, the integrity of their culture appears to be in jeopardy. Their way of life depends on the land and their subsistence on the Porcupine Caribou Herd, which needs its special summer habitat in order to flourish. Their identity as a people depends on the maintenance of their language and respect for their traditions. Sensitivity to their situation calls for an understanding of the difficult changes they are facing, changes from the outside that may be too rapid for them to preserve that basic minimum of common culture.

From the side of the wider North American society, the Gwich’in and other native peoples deserve respect. In Christian perspective, this respect stems from the love of neighbor that stands at the center of the tradition and the norm of justice. There is also a need to address the dependency of industrial societies on the consumption of copious amounts of energy. Can such consumption be justified on grounds of economic sufficiency? Is it sustainable? Is it really integral to North American identity? These are questions North Americans should address before drilling begins in ANWR.

The third dimension is the integrity of nature. While human integrity and nature’s integrity are separated in many people’s minds, they are related because humans are a species in nature like any other species. All species must use nature as a resource to survive. The human species and other species are distinct because other species do not exercise intentionality, at least not in the same way or to the same degree. Therefore, it is incorrect to speak of a harmony of act and intention, justice, or sin in the rest of nature. These terms apply to humans. Still, the concept of integrity may be even more relevant to nature, considering the root meaning of the word.

The integrity of an ecosystem or species is its intactness, its capacity to evolve dynamically or sustain itself so that a variety of individuals and species may continue to interact or fit together. What comes first to mind is a pristine (untouched) wilderness. This is too static a concept, however, and today a rare exception as humans have made themselves at home in an ever greater number of earth’s ecosystems. Rather than some abstract, pristine ideal, it is better to speak in terms of the norm of sustainability. This norm allows for human participation in and use of nature without endorsing activities that cause the disintegration of systems and species. Such activities should be named for what they are—sin.

Maintaining the integrity of ecosystems is not solely a prudential matter for humans. Nature in biblical understandings has more than use or utilitarian value. It also has intrinsic goodness, at least in the understandings of the writers of Genesis 1, where God sees nature as good independent of humans, and in Genesis 9, where God makes a covenant with all of creation. In Christian perspective, nature is much more than a resource, or backdrop, or something to be overcome. Nature is to be cared for (“till it and keep it” in Genesis 2:15) as Jesus himself cared for others and sought their fullest realization. Humans are called to be good stewards in the image of God as that image is revealed in Jesus Christ, a concept discussed more fully in the “Sustaining Dover” commentary. God will eventually redeem the whole creation (Rom 8). Nature’s integrity is represented in this case by the Porcupine Caribou Herd. Oil drilling in its summer range has the potential to degrade habitat critical to the herd. The integrity of the herd is threatened and with it the social integrity of the Gwich’in.

ENERGY AND AMERICAN INTEGRITY

The era of cheap and abundant energy is almost over. The fossil fuels (oil, gas, and coal) that currently support industrial societies are being depleted rapidly and are not renewable. Oil and gas will be in short supply
and very expensive sometime in the next century. Already production at
Prudhoe Bay adjacent to ANWR is declining and will be a mere trickle of
its former self by 2015. According to a recent report by the US Geological
Survey, economically-recoverable coal reserves may only last another one
hundred and twenty-five years due to increased consumption. Of great
concern with fossil fuels, however, are their serious drawbacks, notably
air and water pollution, degradation of the land, global climate change,
and eventual depletion.

Global climate change is particularly troublesome. Fossil fuels are de-
composed organic matter that grew millions of years ago. When burned,
fossil fuels produce a variety of gases that pollute the air. They also produce
nontoxic carbon dioxide (CO2), the levels of which in the atmosphere have
increased 20 percent in the past forty-five years. They continue to rise
rapidly. The vast majority of scientists think that increasing levels of CO2
and other so-called greenhouse gases will result in a temperature rise of
four to ten degrees Fahrenheit by 2100. They say average global surface
temperatures have already risen over one degree over the past century.

Evidence of warming is now available, including retreating mountain
glaciers, a thinner arctic ice pack, animal and plant shifts, rising ocean lev-
els, and heat-damaged coral reefs. Scientists are not altogether clear what
will happen if this increase continues unabated, but some predict the inunda-
tion of low-lying areas, more extreme weather events, hotter summers
with more drought, and more heat-related illnesses and deaths. A minority
of scientists disputes the theory of global climate change and dismisses the
evidence as natural variation.

In terms of supply, the prospects for nuclear energy are brighter, but
the environmental impacts of present technology are as bad as or worse
than those of coal. Energy from the fission of heavy atoms is more or less
on hold because of economic costs, continuing concerns about safety, the
threat of terrorist attack, and the vexing problem of waste storage. Energy
from the fusion of hydrogen atoms holds great promise but may never be
commercially available due to the difficulties and dangers of containing the
great temperature and pressure necessary for a sustained reaction to take
place. It is also likely to be very expensive.

Unless fusion is harnessed at a reasonable cost, nations will eventually
need to meet their energy needs from sources that are sustainable over a
long period of time, essentially renewable resources. Solar power is fre-
quently mentioned in this regard. Conservation, the name given efforts to
save energy either by cutting back or by producing with greater efficiency,
will also be essential.

The realm in which renewable sources of energy and conservation reign
will be markedly different from the present realm where economic growth,
as measured by the Gross Domestic Product, governs. Sustainability and
sufficiency will necessarily guide energy decisions, not growth, at least
not growth of energy and resource-intensive production and consumption.

Between this realm and the one to come there will be a difficult period of
transition that is already beginning and whose duration is difficult to predict
because the rate of technological innovation cannot be known. The realm
to come can be delayed if limits to growth are aggressively attacked with
the so-called technological fix, that is, a commitment to find technological
solutions to resource constraints.

Certainly new technology will have a role to play, but if the shape of hu-
man communities and the distribution of costs and benefits are disregarded
in the rush for technological solutions, the new realm will hardly be worth
inhabiting. Groups like the Gwich’in, if they can continue to exist in such a
climate, will be peripheral. Social scale will be large and structure complex,
with hierarchical, centralized, and bureaucratic administration. Materialism
accompanied by great disproportions of wealth will continue as the reigning
philosophy. In short, social integrity will be under severe pressure from the
demand to find “fixes” and to pay those who can.

Alternatively, a society geared to renewables and conservation will bring
pressure on everyone to live sustainably and to be satisfied with basics. It
will be a society where appropriate scale, simplicity, a greater degree of
decentralization, and greater equality will prevail.

Energy choices are social and value choices. If a critical mass of North
Americans decides on lives that consume large amounts of energy and natural
resources, or alternatively, to live sustainably, it will simultaneously choose
the economic and political structures to organize and sustain such decisions.

The decision to explore for oil in ANWR is thus much larger than
meets the eye when technological and economic calculations are the only
factors. In its largest dimension the question is, What kind of society do
present stewards of the earth want for themselves and their children?
And beneath this lurks the basic question of social identity and character.
Who are North Americans as a people? What should be the center of their
common culture?

The question of basic identity goes even deeper. In the commentary on
the case “Rigor and Responsibility,” two normative Christian traditions
governed the analysis—rigorous discipleship and responsible consumption.
The amount and style of energy consumption currently enjoyed by North
Americans are difficult, if not impossible, to justify in terms of either tradi-
tion. Energy sufficiency can certainly be endorsed and a case made for oil as
necessary in any transition, but the unnecessary and wasteful consumption
of the present not only violates the norm of sustainability but also the model
of frugality and simplicity seen in the person of Jesus Christ.
In sum, Christians will have difficulty justifying exploration in ANWR even before they consider environmental effects. Yes, oil will be needed in the transition to a more sustainable society, but until North Americans reduce their high levels of consumption and consider their identity in a world of limited resources, all the oil in ANWR will make little difference. The worst possible outcome stares them in the face: further depletion of oil reserves, no long-range alleviation of supply problems, and the possible loss of the Porcupine Caribou Herd with its consequent impact on Gwich’in culture.

**THE CURRENT ENERGY DEBATE**

Today, two primary visions of energy futures vie with each other to dominate the direction of US energy policy. The traditional vision behind recent Republican Party initiatives calls for increasing the supply of energy and would assign large corporatons the primary task of finding new sources and generating power. Advocates of this vision assume technological innovations and market mechanisms will overcome resource limits and pollution problems. Willing to entertain a few conservation measures and endure limited environmental regulation, these advocates hold out for a minimum of government intervention in markets. Their vision of the future is largely economic. In their vision economic growth will provide ample wealth for everyone as long as the nation stays the course of market capitalism. Drilling for oil in ANWR follows easily because human economic good takes first priority.

In contrast, a new vision of a sustainable energy future with broad support in the environmental community has emerged. Its proponents see government and the corporate sector cooperating to provide sufficient energy supplies while protecting the environment. They recommend dispersed and less intrusive technologies and a more equitable distribution of income, wealth, and power. They are more ecocentric as opposed to anthropocentric and focus on environmental limits to continued economic expansion. They would not drill for oil in ANWR.

**GWICH’IN INTEGRITY**

The view of the Gwich’in in this case is through the eyes of a non-native on a short stay who is unfamiliar with their culture and has no formal training as an observer. Any one of these limitations might skew his observations.

While caution is warranted, a few things are clear. First, the Gwich’in are deeply concerned about the Porcupine Caribou Herd for reasons of subsistence and social integrity. Their history is tied nutritionally and spiritually to the herd. Were the herd to lose its integrity, the Gwich’in would receive another rude shock to their identity.

Second, Gwich’in culture, like most native cultures in the Americas, is in jeopardy. Ron wonders whether there is enough common culture left to maintain social integrity. The Gwich’in worry about this too but also express words of hope and show signs of reinvigoration.

One way to approach the situation is to advocate closing ANWR to exploration and to pursue a policy of disengagement, leaving the Gwich’in to work out their own future. Such an approach has its attractions, given past injustices. The perceived need for oil, the many linkages between cultures in Alaska, and the intermingling of peoples on the land, however, make disengagement all but impossible.

Alternatively, policymakers could continue to pursue the two patronizing approaches that have governed US policy in the past. The first of these two approaches pictures Native Americans as backward savages in need of superior Western technology, social institutions, and culture. While still widely held, this picture must be dismissed outright and confession made for the expropriations, massacres, and deceptions it has promoted. The chapter on the domination and elimination of Native Americans by people of European origins is one of the ugliest in the annals of world history.

The other traditional approach is to idealize Native Americans as “noble savages.” This idealization, while more sensitive than the first, leads to confusion about native care of the land, the moral superiority of native peoples, the ease and comfort of nomadic life in a harsh climate, and the place of native religions in modern technological society and in the environmental movement.

The Gwich’in have a different—not a superior or inferior—way of life. They are a shrewd and politically interested community of people who have learned how to negotiate from strength. They know of the potential monetary rewards of oil production in ANWR. They know that the Porcupine Caribou Herd is resilient and that the environmental consequences of oil production at Prudhoe Bay are not altogether clear. They know they have political support in the rest of North America, and they know how to use it. They know as sub-Arctic people that they have different political interests than the Inupiat on the north slope. They know that northeastern Alaska is not Eden.

How then should North Americans view the Gwich’in? Most appropriate is a perspective that begins with respect and exhibits a concern for their
social integrity. Included should be a frank recognition that a conflict continues between two cultures, the one closely linked to a subsistence way of life on land, the other more powerful, linked to modern technology and capitalistic economic organization.

Traditionally, the Gwich'in were hunter-gatherers who long ago migrated from Asia and settled in the sub-Arctic south of the Brooks Range in Alaska and the Yukon and Northwest Territories in Canada. They subsisted directly off the land, primarily on the Porcupine Caribou Herd, which they harvested in sustainable numbers. Life was difficult, but the people were resourceful. They relied on sharing, the extended family, and respect for the wisdom of others, especially elders.

Necessarily, they had a special relation to the land and to its flora and fauna. To the Gwich'in, the land is sacred. It is inalienable. It cannot be bought or sold but is held in common as the basis of subsistence. Subsistence is much more than a way of securing food. It is a productive system that entails living directly off the land and demands the organized labor of practically everyone in the community. There are countless tasks in a subsistence economy, each requiring specialized skills. Subsistence is also a system of distribution and exchange that operates according to long-established rules. It links the generations and knits the community into a common culture. It is the material basis for Gwich'in values and underlies the relation of the Gwich'in to the land.

Modern industrial society is obviously different, perhaps most obviously in how it relates to the land. Those in modern society are not as close to the land. They do not see it as sacred. They buy and sell it and encumber it as private property. They view it through the eyes of the economist as a factor of production and obtain its produce by selling their labor and purchasing the means of subsistence in markets far removed from the land.

The traditional Gwich'in way of life persists in spite of deep inroads by modern industrial society. Cultures are never static, of course, but the rapidity of the changes, many of which have been imposed, not chosen, have the Gwich'in worried about their future. Imported goods and food; movement into villages under the influence of Christian missionaries; the introduction of schools, welfare payments, and wage labor; and the acceptance of labor-saving and recreational technologies have brought unprecedented and swift changes. With them have come values and methods of social organization quite foreign to native peoples and a sense of inferiority and powerlessness.

That identity and alcoholism are problems is not surprising. The imports from modern society form a barrier separating Native Americans from their traditional cultures. The words of Inupiat Polly Koutchak, quoted in Thomas R. Berger's *Village Journey*, express this sense of being walled off that also seems to characterize the lives of many Gwich'in:

I always feel deep within myself the urge to live a traditional way of life—the way of my ancestors. I feel I could speak my Native tongue, but I was raised speaking the adopted tongue of my people, English. I feel I could dance the songs of my people, but they were abolished when the white man came to our land. I feel I could heal a sick one the way it was done by my ancestors, but the White man not only came with their medicines—they came with diseases. What I'm trying to emphasize is that I am one in the modern day attempting to live a double life—and, from that my life is filled with confusion. I have a wanting deep within myself to live the life of my ancestors, but the modernized world I was raised in is restricting me from doing so.

The future of the Gwich'in's subsistence way of life is in jeopardy. Ron Blanchard's account, however, reveals considerable evidence of continuing social integrity. The Gwich'in have organized themselves to defend their interests. A spirit of resistance is expressed in the refusal by some to speak English and in opposition to oil production in ANWR. The Gwich'in recognize shortcomings in their school system and the importance of language to a cultural identity. Younger people are returning to the villages to raise their families. Many seem determined to overcome the ravages of alcoholism. Skeptics might view this evidence as staged by the Gwich'in to impress unsophisticated observers or as a failure to assimilate to a superior culture. In contrast, eyes of respect will interpret this evidence as a triumph of the human spirit.

Nor should the Gwich'in's subsistence way of life be dismissed. Granted the Gwich'in have purchased tools to make that way of life easier and as a result must resort to wage labor. Granted also, they have supplemented their diets with food from the outside, thereby improving nutrition. These actions are not decisive, however. Their subsistence way of life will continue as long as they choose to live in rural Alaska, for the simple reason that a market economy will never produce a sufficient economic base to support them in this setting. Except for the oil, which is not on Gwich'in lands, there are not enough commercially valuable resources in rural Alaska.

Respect for the Gwich'in in their subsistence way of life is important in this case. From the outside it is a matter of justice and recognizing the legitimacy of Gwich'in concern about identity, the land, and the caribou. From the inside it is a matter of economic sufficiency and the maintenance of a common culture.
The Porcupine Caribou Herd is central to Gwich' in integrity. The caribou are the means of continued subsistence. Cultural identity is bound up with the land and the herd. Oil exploration is viewed as a threat to the herd and as another one of those barriers that will the Gwich'in off from their identity. Respect in this case means listening to what these people are saying.

NATURE'S INTEGRITY

When anthropocentrism dominated discussions such as this, a commentary would have ended with the preceding section or with a short statement of the value of the Porcupine Caribou Herd as a resource for Gwich'in subsistence. Utilitarian considerations dominated analysis. The intrinsic value of landscapes, species, and ecosystems was left out or separated off into the realms of philosophy or theology. This is no longer the case. Analysis needs to be fully integrated and nature’s systems viewed as having value of their own.

The issue for the integrity of nature in this case is the sustainability of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, whose survival depends on the preservation of summer habitat on the north slope of the Brooks Range in ANWR. On the one hand, the need to preserve this habitat is symbolic of a more general problem: the worldwide degradation of land and ecosystems that causes the extinction of species and the reduction of biodiversity.

The causes of this wider degradation are complex, but certainly an increased human population that consumes more and uses more powerful technologies is principal among them. Oil exploration and development in ANWR on fragile Arctic tundra is simply another example of behavior that degrades the natural environment, Glen Stone and his safeguards notwithstanding. In some cases, and this may be one, any intrusion whatsoever can be destructive, and humans should probably stay out.

On the other hand, the issue is quite specific: the impact of oil exploration and development on the herd and other species that inhabit the Arctic ecosystem. Exploration itself may be innocent enough if all it means is looking around, overturning a few rocks, probing the ground here and there, and then leaving. Who could object? Producing oil is another matter.

The case itself offers important information about the Porcupine Caribou herd, not all of which bears repeating. According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the herd currently numbers about 123,000 animals, down from a high of 178,000 in 1989. Critical to the herd is its summer calving and feeding in areas believed to have the greatest potential for oil discovery. If the herd is displaced from its richest feeding grounds to others where the vegetation is less nutritious and predators are more numerous, the herd may suffer. Less nutrition means less weight gain. Weight gain is critical for the females and is directly related to calf survival and birth rates the following summer. Predators are found in greater numbers to the south in the foothills of the Brooks Range. Presumably the herd would move in that direction with displacement, since this is what occurs in years of heavy snowfall in the prime feeding areas. In good weather years, displacement might have little effect, but scientists are concerned about other years where displacement would add to already bad conditions and put the herd under stress.

The more than thirty years of experience with the Central Arctic Herd at Prudhoe Bay is the only evidence that scientists have to predict effects on the Porcupine Herd in ANWR. The Central Arctic Herd numbers about 32,000 animals. It grew rapidly in the late 1970s and early 1980s. After 1985 the ratio of calves per one hundred cows dropped, more so in areas in the herd’s western range near oil production at Prudhoe Bay. More recently, the herd’s numbers have been increasing. Scientists are cautious about these data, however. There is no long-range information on numbers or calf/cow ratios. The estimates of herd size are based on aerial surveys. Natural fluctuations in ratios and size are to be expected, and without base-line date, causes of short-range fluctuations are difficult to determine.

The data suggest little impact but are not conclusive. Until more data are gathered, scientists are reluctant to make predictions on the basis of trends in the Central Arctic Herd.

Scientists have arrived at several significant conclusions, however. The Central Arctic Herd avoids humans, roads, and production facilities at Prudhoe Bay, the females more than the males. In other words, production facilities displace the herd. Also, the herd as measured by calf density is in worse shape the closer its animals are to production facilities. This is the evidence that worries scientists and the Gwich’in, for displacement in ANWR would drive females to less favorable calving and feeding grounds.

PERSONAL INTEGRITY

Mary Peters’s reluctance to speak English in public gatherings is probably difficult for most North Americans to understand. English is, after all, the main language of international communication, not to mention the language of common culture in the United States. If Mary’s first priority is to get the Gwich’in’s message out to observers such as Ron, it would behoove her to communicate directly instead of through an interpreter.

Mary is, however, speaking to her own community as well, and it is probably more important for her to establish her own integrity within the community before she speaks to outsiders. Whatever else, her reluctance to
speak English should not be viewed by outsiders as a snub or as culturally backward. To expect Mary to give up what is central to her culture and her own identity is the epitome of cultural imperialism. Mary’s act is in keeping with her intention to reinvigorate Gwich’in culture.

As for Ron Blanchard, he must decide how to word his report and what to recommend concerning oil exploration and production in ANWR. Personal integrity depends on receiving God’s power of integrity. Ron’s first act should be a prayer for openness and discernment.

Ron might next reconsider his intentions. The case makes clear that he is troubled by the threats to Gwich’in social integrity. The disintegration of the Porcupine Caribou Herd would threaten their subsistence way of life and arrest efforts to reinvigorate old traditions. Ron is no doubt aware of the tortured history of Native Americans in post-Columbian North and South America. Under the norm of justice with its concern for the poor and oppressed, he might well give the Gwich’in the benefit of the doubt about their motivations, their reading of the scientific evidence, and the political nature of their appeal. He should be careful not to cloud his judgment with patronizing illusions about Gwich’in nobility, however.

The case also reveals that Ron has convictions about excess energy consumption. He listens carefully to Glen Stone, who is convinced that energy efficiency for North Americans is at stake, but does not appear to be swayed.

The evidence on the threat of oil production to the integrity of the caribou herd should also be a consideration. If he is perceptive, Ron will pick up the caution of scientists who have studied the possible consequences. The lack of conclusive evidence should lead him to be cautious himself. No longer, he might conclude, can an ethic that considers only human integrity control outcomes. He should also remember that the Porcupine Caribou Herd has intrinsic value as part of God’s good creation.

Finally, Ron will want to bring a special awareness to his decision, an awareness that applies to any visitor to a different culture. Ron is not alone in his lack of understanding of Gwich’in ways or training in methods of observation. In such situations humility about one’s own capacities and respect for the integrity of others are paramount virtues. He should be careful to qualify his recommendation with an admission of his own limitation. He should also be prepared to do more studying and listening and to look at his own consumption of energy.

What Ron decides to do with his observations is finally his responsibility, as it is the responsibility of every visitor to other cultures. Ethical analysis can pave the way to good decisions, but good character and personal integrity are needed to translate analysis into good actions.

CONCLUSION

The case against exploration and production in ANWR is strong. It rests on three pillars: (1) respect for Gwich’in social integrity, (2) respect for nature’s integrity, and (3) the failure of North Americans to curb their energy appetites. The case may not be as strong as it seems, however. ANWR is not on Gwich’in lands or even in the same ecosystem. The main link of the Gwich’in to ANWR is the Porcupine Caribou Herd. If it can be demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt that oil production represents little or no threat to the herd, then Gwich’in integrity is not threatened and the first two pillars fall. Should North Americans curb their demand for energy and thereafter use the oil in ANWR to fuel the transition to sustainable energy consumption, then the third pillar crumbles.

For the moment, however, the three pillars stand. The effects on the herd are not clear, the herd is central to Gwich’in integrity, and North Americans have yet to make a determined effort to change their habits.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Case
Whose Water?

“How are you going to vote, Mike?” Sheila Bloom asked her husband as he prepared to leave home for the County Commission meeting.

“I’m not even sure that we are going to vote on the issue tonight,” Mike replied, knowing the issue she was interested in. “Julie called and said there are so many people who have signed up to talk to the commissioners on the water issue that the commissioners might have to postpone our own discussion and vote at the next meeting, an extra one in two weeks.”

As Mike put on his jacket and headed for the front door, Sheila impatiently said, “You know what I was asking—how do you think you are going to vote on it?”

“I still don’t know, Sheila. I have to listen to all the different points of view first. That’s why I was elected.” At that, Mike went out and closed the door behind him.

“Humpff!” snorted Sheila in dissatisfaction. She was concerned for her brother Eli’s interests and for those of many of her neighbors. Eli had been hired as assistant manager of the new bottled water plant that was to open in Butler six months from now. He was already deeply involved in overseeing aspects of the construction of the new plant, at which a number of her neighbors, some unemployed since 2008 and no longer receiving unemployment, hoped to work. The plant would employ about one hundred people when it was complete.

But now all that was threatened by a mix of lawsuits that had been stirred up by a coalition of local and national environmental organizations.

Butler is a small city of five thousand in Pendleton County, a rural county of fifteen thousand. Butler, like the county seat, Maysville, and virtually all

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This case and commentary were prepared by Christine E. Gudorf. The names of all persons, places, and institutions have been disguised to protect the privacy of those involved.