

## **Preventing Drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge: The Gwich'in Tribes and their Role in the National Policy Debate**

Gwich'in Steering Committee  
Arctic Circle, Alaska

**Contact information:** Gwich'in contact info and a link to their website

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Sarah James  
International Spokesperson  
Gwich'in Steering Committee

**SUMMARY:** Members of the **Gwich'in Nation**, which means "caribou people" number only in the thousands. But they have been united, even reborn in pursuing their steadfast goal: **to prevent oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge**. The Refuge is their home and the calving grounds of the caribou, upon which the Gwich'in rely for food and a way of life. Over the course of 15 years they have effectively organized themselves and built strategic alliances with environmental groups, young people and others. Spokesperson **Sarah James**, describes how they have operationalized the following:

- **Form a representative steering committee:** Solidifying 15 tribes from U.S. and Canada was a crucial first step and is an ongoing organizing mechanism.
- **Broaden the message:** The Gwich'in have shaped a global human rights message, going beyond environmental protection.
- **Form strategic alliances:** Leaders have taken their message far beyond the Arctic Circle. They have pursued alliances with a range of groups and individuals, at times despite criticism.
- **Decrease tribal dependence on oil:** Tribal leaders have evaluated their own practices and are building environmental sustainability in areas such as energy and waste disposal.
- **Train young people to carry on the struggle:** Education, mentoring and training of young Gwich'in and other youth leaders are important to the ongoing strategy.

The following case example offers an introduction to the Gwich'in Nation and their role in a formidable public policy struggle:

### **REBIRTH OF A NATION Gwich'in Steering Committee**

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It was like a rebirth of the nation," says Sarah James. For generations it had been a custom to gather all the member tribes together in the face of a direct threat, but a culture weakened by western influence and a series of bad treaty decisions had left the Gwich'in Nation fragmented and drifting. That was until a proposal to drill for oil in one of the last intact eco-systems above

the Arctic Circle galvanized tribal activists to take a stand, says James, who now serves as an international spokesperson for the tribe. "When the threat of development to the caribou calving grounds became known, the oldest members of the tribe said we need to gather." Adds a tribal activist, "The elders heard about the development and they said, 'How can they do that? How can they just take the caribou away from us.' And they woke up, just like that."

It was the first such gathering in 100 years—15 tribes from the U.S. and Canada—and it led directly to the creation of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, made up of representatives of all Gwich'in tribes in Alaska and Canada, a committee that since 1988 has become a force to be reckoned with in the ongoing debate over whether to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling. "It's not just about the land. It's not just about the animals," says a senior staff member of the steering committee. "It's also about people and a way of life." As the threat of drilling and other energy-related development continues to loom over the tribe, the question for the Gwich'in people becomes very clear: How can a small group of people bring widespread attention to an issue that threatens their very way of life?

### **Relying on the land**

The significance of a direct threat to the caribou herd can't be overstated, say both those inside and outside of the tribe. Because the Gwich'in—which means "caribou people"—rely on subsistence hunting of caribou for food, clothing and other material, any threat to the herd represents a direct threat to a tribe and tribal culture already rocked by modern and western influences. "The native communities here have, to a certain extent, been devastated," says a local radio producer and non-native, who has been active in pro-native causes. "They almost lost an entire generation due to drugs and alcohol and such things. Their whole system of work and support was virtually destroyed."

Putting their culture—and their lives—back together for the Gwich'in means reinforcing their traditional relationship with the land and the animals that roam that land. "Up here people rely on the land," says a Gwich'in activist who has worked hard to pass along traditional culture to young Gwich'in. "You know, 60, 70 percent of the people's diet up here comes from the land and the number one part of their diet is caribou. Winters after the caribou have been here, everyone is happy; no one worries about food. When the caribou don't come, it's a totally different attitude with everybody."

### **Shaping a global message of human rights**

To stop the type of development that the tribe fears as a direct threat to the spring migration of the 120,000 strong caribou herd to their summer calving grounds, the tribe began working on a number of complementing strategies. The tribe knew that to have any hope of success, it had to reach out beyond narrow parts of Canada and the U.S. to the world, in an effort to win support for its cause. And it had to reach out with a powerful message. While members of the tribe feel strongly about protecting the environment, they also felt that framing the issue in terms of environmental protection did not come close to capturing the real stakes involved. "The creator

put us here to take care of this part of the world," says James. "And for thousands of years we've done that and we've done well. Nobody has the right to say we don't have that right."

For that reason, any action taken by large corporations and sanctioned by the U.S. government that threatens that stewardship and that way of life, say the Gwich'in, aren't merely violations of responsible environmental policy, they are human rights violations. "This place is fighting for its life," says a Gwich'in activist. "That caribou out there is our life. What could be more important than fighting for your life?"

To get that message out beyond the confines of tribal borders, the Gwich'in have been doggedly persistent in making contacts, presentations and alliances where and whenever possible all over the globe. "We used to be tucked away up here, safe," says James. "Now we are going to the public to tell our story."

Which is why shortly after the creation of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, its members began contacting potential allies, seeking both funding and partnerships in the cause of spreading the message that a potential significant violation of human rights was on the verge of slipping by an unwary world, and slipping by in the all-too-familiar name of oil. From other Native American tribes and organizations, to religious institutions, to environmental groups, the tribe sent out the call that it was seeking common cause in the clear issue of human rights and cultural survival, survival with significant and obvious environmental stewardship consequences.

Since 1988, with very limited resources and a huge reservoir of determination, James and a small army of tribal spokespeople have been taking every opportunity in every imaginable venue—from congressional hearing rooms to international conferences—to tell their story, garnering widespread national and international media attention and a huge outpouring of outside support in a so-far successful effort to stave off development. "There are only 7,000 of us in 15 villages," says James. "And we're fighting multimillion dollar corporations. So we have to get out there and teach the world. We're not against all development, we are protecting our birth rights."

### **Accentuating the differences; working side by side**

The Gwich'in's alliance with environmental groups has been one of the more interesting facets of the tribe's collaborative approach to activism. Early on, pro-development interests argued that environmentalist groups were merely using the tribe in a cynical effort to stop development. And so the tribe has made a point of clarifying its relationship with its environmental partners. "People have accused us of being 'footsoldiers' for the environmental movement, that environmental groups pay our way to go to conferences," says James. "No, we speak for ourselves. And we speak for all Native Americans. More than 400 tribes throughout the nation have signed on with us. They've signed on with us because they don't want what happened to them to happen to us. We still have our land. We still have our way of life. And that is why churches have signed on with us—mostly the Episcopal and Methodist churches. They understand it's a human rights issue. It's why the World Indigenous Women's Network has signed on with us. They are all good allies and we all work side by side."

### **Relearning stewardship**

Another tactic of pro-development interests in their ongoing efforts to discredit the Gwich'in and their cause has been to charge the tribe with hypocrisy when it comes to oil and protecting the land.

The tribe has been vulnerable to those kinds of accusations. Pro-development forces point to the tribe's own failed attempt to develop oil resources back in the early 1970s, a small-scale effort accepted by a tribe that at the time was desperate for income and susceptible to the schemes of outsiders interested in exploiting the tribe and its resources. The scheme collapsed. "It was a small-scale oil company that was here on our terms that we could stop at any time," says James. When the elders learned that seismic testing for oil involved blasting and other potentially significant environmental disruptions, "the elders said, 'No, let's quit,'" says James, "and that was the end of it."

Still, charge the Gwich'in's critics, the tribe relies heavily on generators for power and snowmobiles for transportation and both require fuel to operate. James acknowledges that the tribe is probably more dependent on oil than it ought to be, but that it is currently working on plans to wean itself from gas and diesel fuel. The tribe, for example, is now experimenting with solar energy for electricity, and beginning to practice simple conservation measures as a way to cut energy use.

Also as a way to stem criticism—and also as a way to introduce the next generation to issues of environmental stewardship—the tribe has reversed decades of heedless waste disposal, practices that tribal activists say stemmed from pure ignorance about the consequences of discarding 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century western-introduced materials in an environmentally careless way. In fact, the tribe is now pursuing practices to both cut down on the waste stream and increase recycling. "We got caught up on the western culture of just throwing things away," says James. "Now where we hunt and fish, it's all clean. Where we can, we use paper instead of Styrofoam. We try to recycle everything."

One of Gwich'in's activists says it is this broader message of taking care of the land that he sees now inculcating a whole new generation of Gwich'in. "One time we got a caribou and brought it back to the village to cook. And as we were preparing it, we noticed it had the cover of a tin can lodged in the top part of its mouth. And there were kids around and we said to the kids, 'Look what happened here. This is why you clean up after yourself all around you.'"

### **New passion in a new generation**

Working to build a continued passion in younger Gwich'in for protecting the land as a way to protect their way of life is an ongoing imperative, say tribal activists of all ages. The Gwich'in Steering Committee has supported young tribe members in efforts to travel, educate themselves and speak out on the issue of oil development and human rights all over the country and the world. James has her own special way of introducing youngsters to her brand of activism. At their request, she says, they come to stay with her for several days to discuss the whole issue of environmental protection as crucial to the tribe's survival. "When they're ready," says James, "they then go out into the world and speak on these issues and do well."

So far, the message seems to have had the desired impact. "When the Bush administration came in and it was pushing really hard on oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and

it looked like it might happen, a lot of young friends throughout the world said, 'What are the Gwich'in going to do? We have to fight this. We have to take this to the streets.' Instead, we decided to have a meeting here and invite all our friends and all of our supporters and have a party. Our elders and leaders honored and celebrated our young people and supporters, and sent a message of truth."

But the threat to the Caribou refuge and the Gwich'in way of life is constant, continuing to reemerge with each Congress, which is why all tribal representatives of the Gwich'in nation now meet on a regular basis, ever since their "wakeup" call in 1988. The gatherings are held to celebrate that awakening, to set strategy for the continuing campaign, and to draw everyone possible in support of the cause, especially the next generation that will be called upon to carry on the fight. "We are fighting toward permanent protection of what Congress calls the coastal plain area 1002 of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge," says James. "We are protecting it as the birthplace of the Porcupine River Caribou Herd and for other life forms. We call the area, 'the place where life begins.' Protecting it not only means protecting animals, but also the Gwich'in way of life. At the moment we believe the best protection is a wilderness designation. The Wilderness Bill has already been introduced in Congress to honor a decision to protect both the wilderness and the Gwich'in way of life."

James and other Gwich'in activists know that the key to protecting that way of life is to continually tell the story of their struggle, including to their own potential up-and-coming tribal leaders. "We have to tell our young people what's going on," says a senior staff member of the steering committee. "And they need to be able to tell their children and grandchildren what they did to protect a strong and viable Gwich'in culture." It is a story that has resonated internationally, and that continues to draw supporters into the widening circle of Gwich'in allies. "And we now have young people who tell the story," she says. "Who say, 'We're going to hold on to this and we're not going to let it go.'"

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