

**Testimony before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee,
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Prepared by Sam Alexander on behalf of the Gwich'in Nation

Vanh gwinzii, Shoozhri' Sam Alexander oozhii, Gwichyaa Zhee gwats'an ihłij, gaa Tanan gwihch'ii. Shiyeghan naji Clarence ts'a' Ginny Alexander gaavoozhri', Gwichyaa Zhee gwats'an ginliij.

Good morning, my name is Sam Alexander, I am from Fort Yukon, Alaska, but I live in Fairbanks, Alaska. My parents are Clarence and Ginny Alexander from Fort Yukon.

Today I am here to talk with you about why my people, the Gwich'in Nation, adamantly oppose the opening of the Arctic National Wildlife refuge. As a graduate of West Point and as a prior US Army Special Forces Officer, my people have asked me to speak because I have walked in two worlds: Your world, and the Gwich'in world.

So, who are we? The Gwich'in are the northernmost Indian Nation, living in fifteen small villages scattered across an area extending from northeast Alaska in the United States into the northern Yukon and Northwest Territories in Canada. These communities include Arctic Village, Venetie, Fort Yukon, Beaver, Chalkyitsik, Birch Creek, Stevens Village, Circle, and Eagle Village in Alaska, and Old Crow, Fort McPherson, Tsiigehtchic, Aklavik, and Inuvik in Canada. The home of the Gwich'in People follows the migratory route of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, which sustains our way of life.¹

The Gwich'in are the caribou people. The Gwich'in have lived in this area and relied on the Porcupine Caribou Herd since time immemorial. Caribou are how we survive and are integral to who we are and how we define ourselves. Caribou are our stories, our soul, the food on our table, our clothes, and our tools.

In 1988 our elders called together the chiefs of all the Gwich'in villages in Alaska and Canada for a traditional gathering because of their concern about proposals to drill for oil in the Coastal Plain of the Refuge. The Gwich'in are so connected to the health of the Porcupine Caribou Herd that it caused our entire nation to come together for the first time in decades. Our elders recognized that oil development in the Porcupine Caribou Herd's calving grounds was a threat to our people. At that gathering, we unanimously decided to speak with one voice against oil and gas development in the birthing and nursing grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd. Our unified voice is expressed in a formal resolution, Gwich'in Niintsyaa.² This resolution calls on the United States to recognize the rights of the Gwich'in People to

¹ Gwich'in Steering Committee (2012). Primary Habitat of the Porcupine Caribou Herd. <http://ourarcticrefuge.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/mappch.pdf>.

² Gwich'in Steering Committee(1988). Gwich'in Niintsyaa Resolution. <http://www.gwichinsteeringcommittee.org/gwichinniintsyaa.html>.

continue their way of life and to permanently protect the Coastal Plain of the Refuge as Wilderness. The villages of the Gwich'in Nation unite every two years to reaffirm that resolution. The 1988 gathering also led to the formation of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, which works on behalf of the Gwich'in Nation to permanently protect the calving and nursing grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd from development.

So, why do we oppose the opening of the Refuge to drilling?

At the heart of the issue is freedom. The freedom for us to continue to exist as an indigenous people. To exist as Gwich'in.

What does it mean to be Gwich'in? The word *Gwich'in* means people of a place. And for tens of thousands of years our place has been the land now known as North Eastern Alaska and Western Canada. To be Gwich'in is to be connected to the land. To be Gwich'in is to believe that the land and the animals on it are owed our deepest respect. In that regard, it is our duty as Gwich'in to protect the land and the animals. We as Gwich'in see the desire to open up the Refuge as an attack on us, and on the Porcupine Caribou herd on which we depend.

Like many Gwich'in, I served in the US Military. As a Green Beret I deployed to Iraq to "free the oppressed." Little did I realize that I would come home to find my own people's freedom under attack. When we advocate for our traditional ways, we are sometimes viewed with derision, as if we were trying to fight the unstoppable advance of "progress." But we take the long view and we embrace our traditional ways because they have served us well for millennia.

Even people down here have started to embrace our ways. You see it in renewed interest in diets free of processed food, what we would call our traditional diet. Science now tells us that walking amongst the natural world is good for your brain.³ You don't have to tell a Gwich'in person that. In fact, when someone is looking unhealthy, we say *Nanakat gwats'ihindii*...Go out to your land. We say that because we know that the land will heal you. The land is essential to our way of life; it provides us sustenance, and we view it as sacred. The Caribou come from a place we call *Izhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit*, the sacred place where life begins. And these very grounds are being threatened by oil development. A study by the National Research Council outlines how drilling on the North Slope has disrupted the migration and behavior of Caribou.⁴

This brings us to the issue of food security. What is food security? According to the United States Department of Agriculture, food security means access by all people at

³ Reynolds, Gretchen (2015). How Walking in Nature Changes the Brain. New York Times. July 22, 2015.

⁴ Committee on Cumulative Environmental Effects of Oil and Gas Activities on Alaska's North Slope, Board on Environmental Studies and Toxicology, Polar Research Board, Division on Earth and Life Studies, National Research Council of the National Academies. (2003). Cumulative environmental effects of oil and gas activities on Alaska's North Slope. Washington, D.C. :National Academies Press.

all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food insecurity is defined as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.

What is adequate food? For Gwich'in, the only real adequate food is food that comes from the land— caribou, moose, salmon. We have a hard time eating your “health food.” As a cadet at West Point, I tried following a “healthy diet” full of fruits and vegetables and it was disastrous. I found out years later that I couldn't eat tomatoes, apples, and a whole host of other “healthy foods.” Over the thousands of years of calling the Arctic home, we had adapted to a largely animal-based diet.⁵ It wasn't until I started eating more traditional Gwich'in food did I start to feel healthy again.

The opening of the Refuge to oil development and subsequent decline of the Porcupine Caribou herd will limit our access to healthy traditional food and push us from food security into the realm of food insecurity. No amount of money can replicate our healthy traditional diet. Tell me how replacing Caribou with highly processed foods is going to be better for us. It will not. If we had to rely on our stores for food, we'd be looking at a steady diet of SPAM, macaroni and cheese, and other shelf-stable delicacies, often at 4 or 5 times the price of what you find in the Lower 48.

And to what end are you opening up the Refuge? To what end will you destroy our way of life? You aren't addressing climate change, which has been stressing our other food sources as well as stressing the caribou. You aren't addressing our nation's growing deficit; in fact, opening the Refuge represents a drop in the bucket of our budget ills. You aren't even addressing energy security; As a former Special Forces Officer I fail to see how opening the Refuge at a time when we are already a net exporter of energy provides us any geopolitical advantage. We are hard pressed to understand your reasoning behind opening the Refuge.

So, I will leave you this. The late Traditional Chief Moses Sam of Arctic Village once said when describing his upbringing on the land, “I was never hungry, it was ... a rich life.” We Gwich'in live a rich life. We live a rich life because of our connection to the land and to the Porcupine Caribou Herd. Money can't buy our wealth, but the reckless pursuit of money can take it away. And for that, we will never stop fighting to protect the Porcupine Caribou Herd and our way of life. Thank you for your time, Mahsi' choo.

⁵ Fumagalli et al (2015). Greenlandic Inuit show genetic signatures of diet and climate adaptation. [Science](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aab2319). 349(6254):1343-7. doi: 10.1126/science.aab2319.