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Wendell Berry

Hell, No. Of Course Not. But . . . (2001)

I MADE A SORT OF VOW to myself some time ago that I wouldn't support any more efforts of wilderness preservation that were unrelated to efforts to preserve economic landscapes and their human economies. One of my reasons is that I don't think we can preserve either wildness or wilderness areas if we can't preserve the economic landscapes and the people who use them.

If the survival of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is now in crisis, should I make an exception? Well, maybe so. Do I want that refuge to be opened to oil exploration now that the Democrats, those redoubtable nature-protectors, are out of the way? Hell, no. Of course not. I would hate to see Alaska raped by the lords of timber and energy, as large sections of my own state have been. And so I add my vote to the votes of all the others who will be saying no.

But do I think that if we no-sayers "save" the refuge from the present threat we will have saved it? I will have to vote no again, and for the same reasons that I made my vow in the first place. You can't save wilderness preserves, refuges, and parks, if at the same time you let the economic landscapes and the land-using economies go to the devil. I

can't look at the crisis of the Arctic Wildlife Refuge except as the result of a radical failure of the conservation movement over the last fifty or so years: its refusal to see that conservation as we have known it is not an adequate response to an economy that is inherently wasteful and destructive; its apparent belief that nature or wildness can be preserved merely by preserving wilderness; its inability to connect wilderness conservation with soil conservation or energy conservation or any form of frugality; its cherished contempt for ranchers, farmers, loggers, and other land users.

Suppose that fifty or sixty years ago conservationists had seen fit to cherish and protect that wildness that existed on the millions of small farms and ranches that we had then. If they had done so, we would have a lot more wildness than we have now, and a lot more farmers and ranchers, and the conservationists would have a lot more friends, even in the government. And think of the wildness that still might be preserved and nurtured, and the anguish that still might be prevented, if conservationists could recognize and support such a possibility even now. Think how much petroleum might be saved if more people were eating food produced by local farmers or ranchers. If the entire food economy is entirely dependent on long-distance transport, how can we avoid drilling for oil wherever we might find it?

The Arctic Wildlife Refuge is under threat now because policy may go wrong, because of greed and ignorance in high places, because corporations have no conscience. All that is true. But a lot more is true than that. The Refuge is also under threat because we have no energy policy, no agricultural policy, and no forestry policy that is not keyed to consumption rather than conservation. Why do we not have better policies? Because there is no organized public demand.

For this, I think, conservationists must bear a generous portion of the blame. They have cared too little for landscapes that were not describable as "wilderness" or "open space." They have too thoughtlessly "benefited" from cheap food and cheap fuel. When I think of the threat to the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, I think also of conservationists and wilderness lovers who fly or drive thousands of miles to walk a few hours or days in a certified wilderness. We have got to think of something better. If we don't, the government won't.