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The Perils of Defensive Conservation

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The perils of defensive conservation

With snow flurries and sub-zero temperatures, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge welcomed the winter season. The atmosphere in Congress was considerably warmer, as Senator Ted Stevens (R–AK) fumed over another lost chance to promote oil and gas development in the Refuge. In December 2005, by a four-vote margin, the Senate failed to move forward on a defense spending measure that would have authorized drilling on the coastal plain of the Refuge. This concluded a dramatic year of legislative maneuvers that brought the oil and gas industry closer to the Refuge than ever before.

For those advocating ecological protection of the Refuge, the success of the filibuster was an occasion for celebration. Yet there is something deeply unsatisfying about the victory. As with so many decisions to forego ill-conceived or damaging projects, conservationists can never rest easy. Drilling proponents will be back to attach a filibuster-proof rider to the budget reconciliation bill this spring. The battle will be launched again, as it has been nearly every year during the past quarter-century.

In the meantime, conservationists face the exhausting chore of running to new barricades each week, fighting on multiple fronts to stop Congress from gutting laws related to mining, endangered species, and national parks. Unfortunately, responding to the threat du jour has limited effect, and protection from today's threat does not guarantee sanctuary for tomorrow. This is a bracing reminder of the limitations of defensive conservation.

While intensive use of natural resources, such as mining, generally inhibits activities more gentle on the land, such as hiking and wildlife conservation, the reverse is not true. This is the asymmetry that justifies precaution and strict laws controlling pollution and resource extraction. Oil and gas development in the Arctic Refuge would impair the ability of caribou, polar bears, and birds to survive. However, protecting these species does not preclude changing our minds and mining in the future.

Conservationists can strengthen their hand by playing offense. One way to build a stronger foundation for protection is to broaden the debate. Instead of arguing about how much harm to the coastal plain is too much harm for the Arctic Refuge, we should be talking about the integrity of the Refuge System, of which the Arctic Refuge is but one node. Ecologists understand the importance of systems and how disturbance can ripple through webs of life. The Refuge System is the world's largest network of protected habitat; current law generally prohibits new oil drilling on refuges, and petroleum development in the Arctic Refuge would set a dangerous precedent. If we allow drilling in the most pristine unit of our best wildlife conservation system, then no place is safe from industrial development.

Recovery and redundancy are two key ideas that scientists need to help popularize in order to recast the legislative tug-of-war over our natural heritage. These principles are embedded in many existing laws, including the one governing the Refuge System. Alas, they are overlooked in the heat of debate over particular projects. A focus on recovery would ask which projects would restore wildlife diversity and ecological integrity across the landscape. Redundancy would prompt the establishment of interconnected systems where the loss of a single population or habitat would not have catastrophic consequences. Congress has ordered the Refuge System to abide by these principles; it should heed its own command.

On the whole, scientists enjoy a privileged position of respect and trust. Yet, too often, they remain on the sidelines of conflict for fear of eroding that trust. Certainly, ecologists should not become antagonists in every debate over development. But earned public credibility is wasted if it is never spent. Ecologists must step forward with a broad vision of environmental management. And if not now, then when?

The message of conservation should be interdependence. On the scale of the debates over uses of the national parks and refuges, we need ecologists to help explain how impairment to one unit of the system weakens the fabric of comprehensive nature protection. More ambitious still would be an affirmative campaign that shows the public how we are all dependent on the services of nature and how environmental health is directly connected to human well-being. This is as urgent in guiding private land conservation as it is for public resource management. Moreover, the legal process is desperate for better standards that can be implemented through existing agencies.

Conservationists need allies in the scientific community to connect the restoration and redundancy agenda with the public's passion for nature. The most important lesson of interdependence for conservation may be its reliance on ecologists in order to get beyond harm prevention and begin envisioning a better world.