Praying for the Sacred Place Where Life Begins

Jan Bronson

Alaska Friends joined the Gwich’in Nation and many others in an all-out effort to protect the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge during the last days of the Trump administration. On December 3, 2020, the US Department of the Interior announced that it would sell oil and gas leases on January 6, 2021. Fairbanks Friend Cathy Walling received a text from a Gwich’in friend asking Cathy to pray, pray, pray for the Sacred Place Where Life Begins, the birthing grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, Iizhik Gwats’an Gwandaii Goodlit.

For six weeks, three mornings a week, we gathered together in prayer for this sacred place. Alaska Friends set the worship intention in motion, and others from far and wide joined in. At the rise of each morning’s worship time, we would share news and make our plans for that day or week, following the guidance of Gwich’in leaders. We submitted testimony, spoke at hearings, and participated in two vigils. Anchorage and Juneau newspapers published a Minute (statement) from our yearly meeting about why we support protecting the Arctic Refuge. We called and emailed major oil and insurance companies and asked them not to bid on or underwrite the leases. We made art, took photos, shared a film, and posted to social media. Underpinning it all, we gathered over Zoom for more prayers. Together we prayed for wisdom, open hearts, imagination, and “re-membering.” We prayed for the safety of the caribou, pregnant at this moment under the starry skies, for the humans who depend on them, and for the well-being of all wonderfully interconnected life.

Now the six weeks are over. Of the 22 coastal plain tracts offered by the Trump administration, nine leases ultimately sold, almost all of them to the State of Alaska. No major oil or gas company bid on the leases, and the US’ six largest banks promised to not finance development in the refuge. Within hours of being sworn in, President Biden declared a temporary moratorium on leasing activity in the Arctic while reviewing its legality. On February 4, 2021, US Rep. Jared Huffman and Sen. Edward Markey re-introduced the Arctic Refuge Protection Act, which would grant wilderness status to the coastal plain while safeguarding the subsistence rights of Indigenous peoples.

The Zoom community we created continues to meet three mornings a week for spoken and unspoken prayer, while we continue to “Try what Love can do.”

Visit DefendTheSacredAlaska.org and OurArcticRefuge.org.

Jan Bronson is QEW Yearly Meeting Representative, Assistant Clerk for Alaska Friends Conference, and a lifelong Alaskan.

Photo: Caribou in Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Photo: FLICKR/ Danielle Brigida