OIL GLUTTON U.S. SHOULD PASS ON WILDLIFE REFUGE:

The price of oil rocketed up last week. So did political interest in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, where billions of barrels of oil and trillions of cubic feet of natural gas lie beneath one of Earth's most pristine ecosystems. To drill or not to drill?

I hope the answer is no.

From the point of view of the oil industry, the basic goal is to tread softly on ANWR, slowly suck up what amounts to a substantial portion of U.S. production, then leave the land alone. From the point of view of environmental organizations, the basic goal is to prevent petroleum industry infrastructure, equipment and human activities from causing irreversible damage to native culture and to the tundra landscape, especially its poster animal, the caribou.

Both points of view are misleading.

The petroleum lobby claims that drilling is essential because petroleum has become a strategic commodity in an increasingly unstable world. They see themselves as the good guys, meeting the public's insatiable demand for portable energy. They prefer us to be patriotic with our petro-dollars by buying American, rather than from some country we can't trust. They want to pump black gold because that's just what they do, and because they're good at it.

The environmental lobby claims that drilling should not be allowed because it will permanently change the ecosystem. But actually, the disruption has already arrived in the form of greenhouse warming. Already, the brisk northern air being breathed by tundra plants is enriched with carbon dioxide. The permafrost soils being tread by tundra creatures are warmer and softer than before. Thaw ponds are expanding into small lakes. Arctic lands are reacting and responding, for good and bad.

I lived and worked in arctic Alaska during the early 1970s when the original pipeline was being built. I've seen wild wolves being fed sandwiches by pipeline work crews. I've seen their prey, the caribou, congregate in two unusual places to avoid the hordes of mosquitoes that seem to dominate the biota of this windy, cold and soggy place. One of their bug-avoiding micro-environments are large, flat-topped patches of ice that form on broad, gravelly river channels where subsurface flow seeps to the surface like a spring, then freezes. Their second refuge is the oil pipeline itself, especially when the breeze is gentle. Under these conditions, I've seen caribou stand in the wind eddies at bends in the pipe, or on the spine of the line itself, where the breeze is steadier. From this narrow anecdotal perspective, there's good and bad with petroleum infrastructure and greenhouse gas, respectively.

My personal opinion is that Big Oil has behaved shamefully. But this hardly matters anymore. The deed is done. The climate of ANWR is already changed. Historically, the environmental industry has scored big on matters involving pollution, species protection and wilderness preservation. But it has lost big on national energy policy. Though excessive energy consumption does serve Big Oil's interest, the real problem is that our country is the world's leading glutton for oil. I do not object to driving cars, buying truck-delivered products, airline travel, home-heating oil or plastic any more than I object to eating nutritious food. My objection is that we've gone beyond energy nutrition into energy obesity, stuffing our faces with oil to the point of binging.

Since ANWR has changed already, and since any drilling will certainly be tightly regulated, one can argue that drilling should proceed. I strongly disagree. The industrial might of the United States should walk away from ANWR, not because petroleum development will disturb a few caribou, but
because it would prove to the world that we have the spiritual self-restraint to leave well enough alone.

No nation can seriously doubt that the United States has the power and technological savvy to intervene in the internal affairs of this remote and hostile ecosystem, and to take whatever is there for our presumed needs. But we would accomplish more for future generations -- and at trivial social and economic cost -- if we took the ethical high ground regarding proper stewardship of the planet.