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On January 25, 2015, the White House released to the press a one-minute video, shot on board Air Force One, in which President Obama announced that the Department of the Interior had developed a new fifteen-year management plan for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. The plan, he said, calls for managing as wilderness the coastal plain of the refuge, the use of which the 1980 Alaska lands act left to Congress to decide; the coastal plain is potentially rich in oil. The president called upon Congress to officially designate the coastal plain as protected wilderness. Oil industry spokespeople, Alaska political leaders, and resource development lobbyists have repeatedly urged Congress to open the coastal plain to exploratory oil drilling. Congress has voted on the issue five times since 1980, failing to muster a sufficient majority for development on four of the votes; the fifth vote was positive but was attached to a budget bill and for that reason vetoed by President Clinton.

The same day as President Obama’s statement, the Interior Department issued a press release announcing revision by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the refuge, of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan and the Environmental Impact Statement for the refuge. Seven million acres of the 19-million-acre refuge already are congressionally designated wilderness. The revision calls for wilderness designation for the other 12.28 million acres. On January 26, the Washington Post reported that, “according to individuals briefed on the plan,” the Interior Department intended also to place off limits to oil drilling biologically sensitive areas of the Arctic Ocean off Alaska’s north coast and would likely impose additional limits on oil and gas production in National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska, which is also on Alaska’s North Slope.

Alaska’s political leaders reacted angrily to these announcements, charging that the Obama administration was trampling on the state’s sovereign rights. “What’s coming,” the state’s senior US senator, Lisa Murkowski, stated, “is a stunning attack on our sovereignty and our ability to develop a strong economy that allows us, our children and our grandchildren to thrive. It's clear this administration does not care about us, and sees us as nothing
but a territory. . . . But we will not be run over like this.” Alaska’s long-serving congressman Don Young said, “Simply put, this wholesale land grab, this widespread attack on our people and our way of life, is disgusting.” The state’s new governor, Independent Bill Walker, said he’d had an hour-long phone conversation with Interior Secretary Sally Jewell during which he’d expressed “strong disappointment.” “I need to send you an invoice for the cost of doing business in Alaska,” he reported telling Jewell, “because you are taking away our ability to earn a living.” State legislators reacted strongly as well, condemning the president’s action by resolution, one state senator using doggerel poetry to warn Obama that Alaskans would not accept his actions peaceably. “While Alaskans might look sweet,” he wrote, “they might be packin’ heat.”
Alaska is a vast and beautiful land. With its rugged, majestic mountains tracked by Dall sheep and brown bears; its untamed rivers coursing through great valleys populated by caribou and moose; and its magnificent forests with old-growth stands 500 years old dominating coastal waters teeming with salmon, crab, and sea otter, it holds pride of place in American environmental consciousness. It is America’s last wilderness, teasing the imagination of any who have reflected on the character of the natural world and its place in human endeavor. Huge in area—equal to 20 percent of the land area of the contiguous United States, with more coastline than the contiguous states combined—and stupefying in its diversity, Alaska stands as a beacon, a statement that there is yet in the world a place of permanent, natural magnificence. It is at once a physical and a mental refuge from modernity and civilization, a preserve of natural earth—what it was, is, and may be.

Much of Alaska, its natural wonder and especially its wilderness, is protected today by federal ownership and management. Sixty percent of the state, 225 million acres, is in federal ownership. More than two-thirds of the federal land is in congressionally established conservation units; half of those are formally designated wilderness, amounting to half of all designated wilderness in the country.

Though the United States purchased the region from Russia in 1867, Congress long delayed a definitive disposition of Alaska’s lands because of ignorance, confusion, and overwhelming challenges, which included policy considerations regarding the region’s indigenous people—12 percent of the total population—and the vexing question of where to find a balance between environmental protection and economic development, between wilderness and frontier. Three forces combined to compel Congress finally to act on what to do with Alaska: Alaska statehood; Alaska Native land claims, driven by the discovery of North America’s largest oil deposit at Prudhoe Bay on Alaska’s North Slope; and the rise of modern environmentalism and subsequent congressional legislation. Congress found it necessary to assign significant portions of Alaska land to each: to the new state, created in 1959; to Alaska
Natives in the landmark Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971; and to federal environmental protection and preservation in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980. Today, of Alaska’s 375 million acres, only about 72 million are unassigned, managed, as are most undesignated US lands, by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

The story of these dramatic episodes has been told. It is a story of the shaping of modern Alaska, in all three instances a story of intense idealism tempered by political maneuvering and economic reality. Along with the state’s unusual economy, that story sets the context of today’s Alaska. Aspects of that story, however, need reexamination. Alaska’s role in the evolution of an ecological understanding of environment and in the subsequent refashioning of environmentalism and the formulation of the Wilderness Act of 1964 is not well known. Initially, visionaries such as George Collins and Olaus and Margaret “Mardy” Murie, through their advocacy of an Arctic wilderness in Alaska, were central to defining what modern environmentalism might mean, as understood by the most ardent and effective spokespersons for environmental protection and those who acted on its behalf—such as Howard Zahniser and David Brower—and also those who opposed them. Later, pragmatic necessities in developing the landmark Alaska lands act of 1980 presaged a redefinition of wilderness and the wilderness idea among environmental scholars, a definition more cognizant of the constancy of human presence in wilderness. Finally, Alaskans, particularly the state’s political leaders, have persistently fought environmental protection and regulation in the state while at the same time embracing virtually any economic development project that holds the promise of jobs and alternative contributions to the state’s economy. Alaska’s economy is uniquely dependent on exploitation of the state’s natural resources because the economy is isolated, remote, narrow, and dependent. Congress made accommodations to Alaska’s economic circumstances in the 1958 statehood act and later in the Alaska lands act of 1980, maximizing Alaska’s access to lands with mineral and other economic potential. Many state leaders have interpreted those accommodations as permanent commitments by the federal government. This interpretation has led to a reflexive resistance to federal actions regarding public lands in Alaska that is significantly greater than is found in other western states, where conflict between federal and state notions of public landownership and management is common. In Alaska, which holds what have been called America’s environmental crown jewels, exaggerated antistatism puts state leaders and
spokespersons at odds with federal environmental regulators whose responsibilities are to protect the land from development and despoliation. This book addresses these aspects of the relationship between Alaska and modern environmentalism and between Alaska and the federal government and does so within the larger context of the unique characteristics that define and explain Alaska today. Because of its unusual pattern of settlement and development, Alaska historically has been a battleground between economic development and environmental protection. This remains as true today as it ever was.

This book is primarily a work of interpretation and analysis. The details of the fights over the establishment of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, permitting the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, and passage of the Alaska lands act, especially the role of the US Congress, have been reconstructed in several excellent accounts. But none place these battles within the unique economic and political structure of Alaska itself. Since the arrival of an appreciable non-Native population in the territory, resident Alaskans have identified with the notion of a developmental frontier. Ernest Gruening, territorial governor from 1939 to 1953 and US senator from Alaska from 1958 to 1968, a vigorous and effective advocate for statehood, characterized Alaska as a modern manifestation of “the westward trek of peoples in search of greater freedom and greater economic opportunity.”1 Like settlers on the American far west frontier, immigrant Alaskans subscribed to an atavistic belief in their democratic right to harvest any and all resources the land provided, without let or hindrance.2 They were persuaded of the inexhaustible nature of Alaska resources, a conviction exacerbated by the small number of people, 224,000 at the time of statehood in 1959, in so vast an area. Alaskans of that era subscribed to what Stewart Udall later labeled the myth of superabundance.3 For these Alaskans, frontier meant development, a pushing back of nature, a conquest. Wilderness was an affront, evidence of challenges yet unmet. Alaskans viewed any restraint on development as unwelcome, unwarranted, and unfair. From early in the settlement experience it has been habitual for Alaskans to interpret environmental regulation as an assault on their economic opportunity and independence.

But this view of their environment, not different from similar convictions held by many residents of western states, is augmented by Alaska’s unique economic and political structure. The state’s economic context colors the way most Alaskans view the environmental community, which has stood behind
federal land regulations since the 1950s. At that time a holistic, ecological concept of environment came to define environmentalism, and environmentalists came to understand Alaska’s vulnerability to development and environmental despoliation, even as opponents to regulation came to understand Alaska’s vulnerability to environmental constraints on economic development. This book adds an understanding of Alaska’s unique structure and its effects on environmental battles.

“Environmentalism,” as used here, is an expansive term that includes a host of ideas and values, including such pragmatic considerations as clean air and water; such scientific concepts as ecosystem; the preservation of a permanent legacy to hand off to future, uncounted generations; and such transcendent ideals as the integration of all species of fauna and flora in an interdependent whole as well as a level of spirituality deemed essential to completion of the human psyche. The battles related here deal both with those ideas and values and with their individual and organizational representation and pursuit. A majority of Alaskans were among those who found environmentalism as so described to be, at best, hopelessly romantic, impractical, and economically threatening and at worst a conspiracy directed against their most cherished freedoms, which they identified with American tradition. An idealized view of nature as pristine and unmanipulated by humans was complicated in Alaska by the presence of a vigorous indigenous population inhabiting the land and harvesting its subsistence resources to sustain itself. Congress executed no treaties with Alaska Natives, so there were no traditional reservations that restricted their movement. Alaska Natives were free to harvest resources from lands and waters across the territory. Within federal regulations, which before statehood were often applied with wide latitude, non-Native Alaskans also inhabited and harvested from lands to which later federal law would severely limit access or place off limits. These conflicting ideas coupled with the unique political economy that has generated antistatism and anti-environmentalism in the state have made Alaska America’s premier environmental battleground.

In the clash over ANILCA in Congress in the late 1970s, environmental lobbyists engendered in national consciousness a sense of ownership of America’s “environmental crown jewels,” a phrase that would be repeated frequently in congressional debate and in the press. Environmentalists wanted Alaska’s unique and grander environmentally significant regions preserved and protected because of their national value—not just Alaskans’ but the
nation’s nature, the nation’s wildlife habitats and recreational plantations. The principal impetus for saving Alaska was conservation for the sake of the philosophical, even spiritual, value attributed to those of the region’s natural areas seemingly unmarked by human manipulation. Perhaps captured in John Muir’s assertion that “the clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness” or in Wallace Stegner’s plea for the preservation of nature as an alternative to living in a human-built environment, the primary reason for preserving Alaska was to save nature, not to use it. Although Alaska’s mountains and forests might house resources that could contribute to long-range sustainability, environmentalists eschewed the notion of ever using them. For modern environmentalism, the place of Alaska’s environmental crown jewels was simply to be there, unmolested by extraction, exploitation, or other development. The fear that Alaska’s pristine natural areas might soon be lost to manipulation, articulated forcefully by the wilderness activist Robert Marshall after his fifteen-month sojourn in Alaska in 1929–1930, motivated many who joined the battle for Alaska lands preservation.

Few outside the elite conservation community knew much about Alaska’s wilderness mountains, valleys, forests, and wildlife when Marshall, Aldo Leopold, and others formed the Wilderness Society in 1935. Even as late as 1963, when the executive council of the Wilderness Society first met in Alaska, the extent and character of the Alaska environment was still largely a mystery to most who professed and supported wilderness values. Identifying and learning about Alaska’s crown jewels was an important first step in waging the fight to save them.

In terms of geography, Alaska suggests a giant appendage protruding off the northwest quadrant of the North American continent between the Arctic and North Pacific Oceans, separated from Asia by the Bering Sea and from Russia by the 56-mile-wide Bering Strait. The land of the peninsula is so huge and variegated as to defy description, its scale dwarfing the frames of reference used to describe and grasp land areas in the contiguous states. At 375 million acres, it’s not just that Alaska is more than twice as big as Texas in land area; of the nearly 90 million acres of national park land in the United States, 55 million are in Alaska. Twelve percent of America’s national forest land, about 22 million acres, is in Alaska, and that includes the two largest, the Tongass and Chugach National Forests. Four federal agencies administer most of the federal land in the state: the National Park Service (NPS), US Forest Service (USFS), US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and BLM.
In reality as in imagination, Alaska is perhaps dominated by the extraordinary Denali, North America’s highest peak (20,310 feet) and anchor of the 650-mile-long Alaska Range, which lies in a north-pointing arc across the center of the region from the White Mountains and the Pacific Ranges at the Canadian border in the southeast to the long and rugged Alaska Peninsula and the Aleutian Islands in the southwest. A dozen major glaciers flow from Denali and its sister mountains’ various flanks, and its snows give rise to four major rivers. Today, three federal conservation units protect parts of the Alaska Range: Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve (13-plus million acres), Denali National Park and Preserve (roughly 6 million acres), and Lake Clark National Park and Preserve (more than 4 million acres).

North of the Alaska Range, the Arctic Brooks Range, which elicited rhapsodic descriptions by Marshall and Adolph, Olaus, and Margaret Murie, stretches across Alaska 700 miles from the Canadian border in the east to the Arctic Ocean coast in the west. With peaks of 9,000 feet, the range is uninhabited but for two Native villages and four small non-Native communities. Three different massive caribou herds cross the range in various places. Today, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (more than 19 million acres) and the Gates of the Arctic National Park (nearly 8.5 million acres) protect spectacular peaks and river valleys in the Brooks Range. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge alone, more than 7 million acres of which is designated wilderness, spans 5 sub-Arctic and Arctic ecological zones and includes 45 species of land and marine mammals and 150 species of birds.

The Chugach Mountain Range, the Wrangell Mountains, and a portion of the St. Elias Mountain Range rise for over 700 miles along the coast of the Gulf of Alaska in Southeast Alaska, subgroups of the Pacific Coast Ranges. Mt. St. Elias in the St. Elias Range is over 18,000 feet; Mt. Marcus Baker in the Chugach Range is over 13,000 feet; within the Wrangell Mountains, Mts. Sanford and Blackburn are over 16,000 feet and Mt. Wrangell exceeds 14,000 feet. The Chugach National Forest includes the Chugach Range; Glacier Bay National Park lies wholly within the St. Elias Range, the Alaska portion of which today is protected by Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve, which also protects most of the Wrangell Mountains.

The mountainous, 300-mile-long Alexander Archipelago, consisting of 1,100 coastal islands, comprises Southeast Alaska, the Panhandle, along with a narrow stretch of the mainland. The 17-million-acre Tongass National Forest encompasses virtually all of the Alexander Archipelago, which includes
the largest remaining stands of old-growth timber in the United States, about 5 million acres; all but half a million acres of that are included in wilderness areas and cannot be logged. Nearly 6 million acres of the total forest are today designated wilderness, protecting a number of unique and endangered species of flora and fauna. Several relatively large communities lie in the archipelago, including the state capital, Juneau, and Ketchikan, Wrangell, Sitka, and Haines.

Southwest Alaska is the largest area of the state not dominated by significant mountain ranges. It is a vast wetland that is home to scores of species and millions of individual migratory waterfowl. Three major rivers bisect the region: the Yukon, Kuskokwim, and Nushagak. Bristol Bay, which comprises the Bering Sea coast of the region, is the most prolific salmon-producing fishery in the world. Several US Fish and Wildlife refuges protect areas of the region today, including Togiak, Yukon Delta, and Innoko.

Other federal conservation units protect vast reaches of tundra and wetlands of Alaska, including the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, Lake Clark National Park, Glacier Bay National Park, Alaska Marine National Wildlife Refuge, Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, and many others, including wild and scenic river designations.

Together these lands comprise an incomparable American legacy for the future. Because of Congress’s failure to provide for a comprehensive disposition of Alaska lands through the first century of US ownership, when modern environmental lobbying organizations began to focus on Alaska’s pristine natural areas, they were largely unprotected by government regulation and thus were regarded by those organizations as exposed and in danger. Most Alaskans, however, did not accept that characterization of Alaska’s wild lands. The confrontation of the two fundamentally different views of Alaska’s environment has made the state a consistent philosophical, environmental, and political battleground. This work reexamines four specific environmental battles that gave form to the emerging and maturing modern environmental movement while at the same time helping to shape modern Alaska.

First, in December 1960, shortly after the electoral victory of John F. Kennedy but before President Dwight Eisenhower had left office, Secretary of the Interior Fred Seaton by executive order established the Arctic National Wildlife Range in far northeast Alaska, bounded by the Arctic Ocean on the north and Canada on the east. Creation of the Arctic range partially realized a dream Robert Marshall had articulated as early as 1938, that Arctic Alaska should
be kept a wilderness, an area of land that might reflect life the way the human race had known it before “the strangling clutch of civilization.”

Senator Gruening, testifying against the proposal to establish the range, asserted that if created, it would be set aside “not for the benefit of human beings, but to satisfy some theoretical conceptions of distant men unfamiliar with Alaska.” This was a common theme in Alaska territorial politics, but instead of diminishing it, statehood exacerbated it, as is explained in chapter 1. Others expanded Marshall’s vision to mean a pristine wilderness of complete ecosystems left intact without human manipulation or imprint, a vision Gruening and other opponents thought a fantasy, one that would deprive Alaskans of their rightful control over their landscape. Subsequent events would intensify this debate, which continues intractably today. Yet while Alaskan leaders opposed creation of an Arctic wilderness with familiar arguments and rhetoric, supporters of the withdrawal did not initially encounter the vehemence and uncompromising adamancy that characterized Alaska’s opposition to regulation that developed after statehood. Olaus and Mardy Murie and others were able to persuade Alaskans that the Arctic wilderness they proposed could be defined so as to be compatible with the state’s character. The battle over establishing the Arctic National Wildlife Range was tame compared to the clashes to come.

Second, signed by President Richard Nixon on November 16, 1973, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline Authorization Act sanctioned construction of the Alaska pipeline from Prudhoe Bay on Alaska’s North Slope to the warm-water port of Valdez on Prince William Sound on the Gulf of Alaska. The vast Prudhoe Bay oil field lay exactly adjacent to the western boundary of the Arctic National Wildlife Range. The pipeline was, as historian Peter Coates writes, “alien in principle” to environmentalists’ image of northern Alaska. William Ransom Wood, president of the University of Alaska, called opponents of the pipeline “anti-God, anti-Man and anti-Mind.” Supporters of the project argued that its impact on wilderness Alaska would be negligible and that the oil would make America energy-independent and guarantee the security of the nation’s supply. Environmentalists might be said to have lost the battle over the pipeline, though environmental lawsuits forced a redesign of the project that made the line far more environmentally secure. Oil drilling in the National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska (NPR-A), adjacent to Prudhoe Bay on the west, and in the Beaufort Sea, north of Prudhoe, is yet embroiled in controversy.
Third, upon leaving office in 1980, President Jimmy Carter called the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act the most significant legislation passed during his tenure as president. Establishing 104 million acres of new federal conservation units in Alaska, ANILCA has been hailed by environmentalists and historians as the most momentous conservation measure ever enacted. Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska called ANILCA the congressional action he most regretted in his forty years of service in the US Senate and the greatest betrayal of Alaska. ANILCA reshaped the interior map of the state, and battles continue over the meaning and implementation of the act regarding subsistence harvest of traditional resources by indigenous and other rural residents and over access to lands it includes.

Fourth, as Congress debated the Tongass Timber Reform Act of 1990, Timothy Egan, the New York Times stringer in Seattle, wrote that the US Forest Service was selling 500-year-old-growth trees in the Tongass for less than the price of a McDonald’s Big Mac. Environmental critics of US Forest Service policy for the Tongass argued that compromise provisions inserted into ANILCA forced a level of timber sales far beyond an amount that could be sold and that the level of harvest threatened the last stands of old growth in the United States. Supporters insisted that the sales were necessary to satisfy the requirements of existing fifty-year logging contracts and to provide jobs that would keep the towns of Ketchikan and Sitka, the location of the two pulp mills on the forest, economically viable. Their owners unable or unwilling to comply with environmental constraints, the pulp mills have since closed. The towns continue to be viable, but controversy endures over Forest Service policy for timber harvesting and over the forest’s inclusion in the national forest roadless policy.

In addition to analyzing each of these contests and examining their role in the rise of modern environmentalism, this book contextualizes these environmental battles with an exploration of Alaskans’ persistent resistance to federal environmental constraints in the name of necessary economic development and states’ rights. The study also includes a review of representative new battles over coal development intended for a global market; the extraordinary Pebble Mine prospect, the very large and potentially hugely profitable porphyry copper, gold, and molybdenum deposit in the headwaters of streams flowing into Bristol Bay, which hosts the largest wild salmon fishery in the world; and a proposal to construct a road through Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, designated wilderness, in the far west of the Alaska Peninsula.
Given Congress’s delay in addressing land disposition in Alaska, it was probably inevitable that Alaska should emerge as America’s premier battleground for the clash between development and preservation and the far more complex dialogue over the meaning and implications of modern environmentalism. This study adds to that conversation the importance of Alaska’s unique economic isolation, its influence in the rise of the ecological understanding of environment, and an explanation of its persistent and virulent antistatism.