

High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

We are the Oil Tribe

Randy Udall | ESSAY | Nov 19, 2001 | *From the print edition*

I've been visiting drilling rigs lately. For an environmentalist, it's an education. Rugged tattooed men, macho diesel pickups and in-your-face bumper stickers: EARTH FIRST! WE'LL DRILL THE OTHER PLANETS LATER.

In a country with 210 million automobiles, only 250 rigs search for oil in America. That seems a small number until you realize that the continent's best prospects were found long ago. Thirty American states produce oil and every one is past its production peak. Oklahoma peaked in 1927, Texas in 1972, Colorado in 1957. It's enough to make you wonder about petroleum prospects on other planets.

As Congress continues to talk about drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, a requiem seems appropriate for a national treasure just 60 miles away. The treasure is Prudhoe Bay, where only 2 billion barrels of oil remain after our consumption of 11 billion barrels.

For the past 20 years, about one in every 10 gallons of gasoline we pumped into our cars came from this enormous oil field on Alaska's North Slope, the largest oil field ever found in North America. British Petroleum discovered the sandstone reservoir a mile below the frozen tundra in 1967. It was 500 feet thick and brimming with oil. By 1980, the field was producing 1.5 million barrels per day and quelling the oil crises of the '70s.

It was Prudhoe oil that Captain Hazelwood spilled in Prince William Sound. It is Prudhoe oil that shows up in the Christmas stockings of every Alaskan, in the

guise of a \$2,000 royalty check.

Prudhoe is one of the earth's 40 super-giant oil fields, and while North America is home to two - the second is in Texas - the Persian Gulf contains two dozen. Seventy-five percent of the world's remaining oil is controlled there by Muslim nations. To an oil geologist, North America is Swiss cheese: Three of every four oil wells in the world have been drilled in the United States.

As Prudhoe Bay passes into history after producing oil worth a quarter-trillion dollars, we ought to take a few moments to honor it. Oil is more central to our way of life than bison were to the Sioux, yet while the Indians celebrated the life-giving animal in dance and ceremony, we fill up at the Kum 'n' Go and carp about the cost.

We are the Oil Tribe, and the defining ritual of our civilization, the act all of us have in common, is not Monday Night Football or church on Sunday, but buying a tank of gasoline. It happens 150 million times each week.

Our petroleum appetite is prodigious. An average American drives 1,000 miles a month, in 20 years equaling the distance to the moon. A typical Baby Boomer will drive and fly more than a million miles in his or her lifetime, equal to 40 orbits around the planet. Per capita, we Americans now consume about 150 pounds of oil each week. Oil is central to our way of life. Oil is our lifeblood.

Yet how can petroleum matter so much and mean so little? Muslims bow to Mecca five times a day. But in a country where mobility is our religion, we don't seem to care that oil won't be ours for the taking forever.

It's almost as if we share a childlike faith: We have plenty of oil now, so there must be lots more where that came from. That naive hope reminds me of a month-long ski trip I took a few years ago with my brother, Brad. Late on our 10th day after skiing 100 miles, we arrived at a food cache we had placed weeks earlier. We were both famished. After wearily digging up the food, Brad grabbed a box of Mystic Mints, his cookie ration for the next 100 miles, and hammered down every single

one in a few short minutes. I shot him an "I can't believe you just did that" look.

"Easy come, easy go," he laughed. That might be an appropriate epitaph for Prudhoe Bay. An oil field created 200 million years ago has been plundered in 20 years. Some people think we should preserve petroleum for posterity. But at the rate we're using the stuff right now, if our grandchildren want any, they'll have to drill on Mars or Pluto.

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