

Committee on Resources

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Testimony of

Mr. George Kaleak, Sr.

Before the Committee on Resources

Saturday, April 5, 2003

Hearing on

H.R. 39, Arctic Coastal Plain Domestic Energy Security Act of 2003;

and

H.R. 770, Morris K. Udall Arctic Wilderness Act

My name is George Kaleak, Sr. I welcome you to my country, the country of my people, who discovered this place thousands of years ago, settled here, protected it have never given it to anyone. This is our place, the place that defines us as a Native people, the place that makes us whole. We are at least as much a part of it as the caribou and the snow geese. . . except we do not migrate as they do.

We use all of this country that drains into the Arctic Ocean. There is no place on the Arctic Slope that does not bear our footprints. No place. We have been everywhere, gathering food, visiting both the living and the spirits of those passed, all who reside forever here with us in this vast home of the Inupiat. If it seems empty to you, you are just not looking, not seeing the real picture here.

Don't be confused by these little houses we sometimes stay in here on Barter Island. We stay in them so our kids can go to school, and so we can make the money we need to live the lives we want to live. Our home is far more than this little village. Our home is all of our country, from the Brooks Range to the south to many miles to sea. As you may have noticed, it is often not easy to tell just what is land and what is sea, where the one ends and the other begins. We use it all, every inch of it. We have to use it all, as we have always done. Otherwise, we could not survive here.

People talk a lot about jobs. Jobs are important to everyone. Their importance to us is probably different from their importance to others. Jobs for our people give us the money we need to live off this country of ours. Today it takes money to harvest the resources of the land and the sea- Years ago, before they found oil at Prudhoe Bay, many people had so little money they could not afford the boats or guns or anything else they needed to harvest the food they needed. Some lived on the very edge of starvation, begging food from those who did have the means to gather it. Those were wretched times. Indeed, there have not been a lot of good tunes here, not until recently.

We see lots of people with romantic ideas about the past, people who think it would be nice to live the way we used to live, indeed, that we should live that way, that there is something wrong with the way we live now. Let me assure you that nobody who ever live that way, at or over the edge of starvation, would say that. That is not a good place to be.

The income most of us now have allows us to buy the tools we need to harvest the land and the sea, to find and deliver the Native food that we crave, the only food that can really sustain people like us- It also gives

us the leisure that every civilization needs to have a decent culture. Among other things, the new revenues generated from our underground resources have created a greatly enriched cultural life for the Inupiat. We dance more and sing more and have a much better time than ever before. We speak our language more, even have it taught in our schools. In those "good old days", our people were beaten for speaking our language. In those days outsiders ran the North Slope and told us what to do. It is not that way anymore. We run our own affairs. We control our lives. We send our kids off to Harvard or Norway, if that pleases them. We can afford to do that.

And we can afford to go to sea and catch the big black whales that give themselves to us. We catch them and thank them and then bring them home and eat them, as they wanted us to do.

We go out in weather like this and look for wolves and wolverine and great bears and we catch the ones who want us to catch them and we make all kinds of beautiful things from them, as they wanted us to do.

We catch the fish and the muskoxen and the white sheep in the mountains and the caribou and the snow geese and the ducks who come to visit, who come here to give themselves to us, and we eat them, as they wanted us to do.

We can do all that because we have the means now to do it. And the time to dance and sing and talk in our own language about what we want to happen here, here in these lands that matter more to us than anyone from any other place could ever imagine.

For reasons beyond us, some people want to take that from us, take our food from our tables, the tools we need to get that food, the joy we now have from being able to dance and sing and tell stories in our own language. Maybe these strange people don't like the sound of our drums, which really is the beat of our hearts. They seem to think this place is empty, a wilderness, a place without people. Or they want to make it that way. The drums of its people seem bother them. They want all that to go away.

It will not. In the end, we shall be here and these strangers will go back where they came from. Whatever anyone calls it, these homelands of the Inupiat will never be a wilderness.

George Kaleak, Sr. is a whaling co-captain and serves on the Native Village of Kaktovik Council.