

Reframing the Last Frontier: Subhankar Banerjee and the Visual Politics of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

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"Cast your eyes on this," implored Senator Barbara Boxer, a Democrat from California, as she stood on the Senate floor and showed her colleagues a picture of a polar bear (fig. 1).¹ A clear blue sky delineates the top of the image, while below, a polar bear lumbers across the ice, its large white figure strikingly reflected in the water. Taken by Subhankar Banerjee in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), the photograph, according to Boxer, offered compelling visual evidence as to why drilling should not take place in this remote Alaskan landscape. President George W. Bush and leading Republicans hoped to open the region to oil development, but Boxer maintained that such actions would threaten the habitat of the polar bear and other Arctic creatures. So on March 19, 2003, in the midst of a heated debate, she continued to display Banerjee's photographs and to urge her fellow senators to vote in favor of an amendment to prevent drilling. Just before the vote was taken, Boxer held up a copy of the photographer's book, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land*, and recommended that everyone visit an exhibition of Banerjee's "breathtaking" photographs, soon to open at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History.² The Senate, much to the dismay of the Bush administration, approved Boxer's amendment by a vote of 52 to 48, thus forestalling, at least temporarily, plans to drill in ANWR.

Yet strange reports began to surface a few blocks away, as officials at the Smithsonian decided, only a few weeks before the show's debut, to eviscerate the captions and relegate the exhibit to an obscure location. Their actions, clearly made in response to Boxer's speech, triggered an unexpected controversy.³ Before it subsided, a relatively unknown nature photographer would find himself embroiled in the culture wars that often erupt on the National Mall, a debate over visual politics that intersected with a range of issues of interest to scholars in American studies, environmental studies, and visual culture. Banerjee's photographs, which thus far have been exhibited in twenty U.S. cities, with several more shows planned through this year, raise important questions about environmental aesthetics and the idea of wilderness, about the relationship between texts and images in visual culture, and about the ongoing contest over how to define the Arctic in the nation's spatial imagination.⁴ For Bush and other drilling proponents, ANWR represents a frontier of economic possibility, a terrain filled with valuable oil reserves; for most environmentalists who oppose drilling, the wildlife refuge signifies pristine nature, a sacred space far removed from the problems of contemporary life. Banerjee's images, paired with selected nature writings and other environmental texts, clearly draw on the latter tradition. Yet they also gesture toward an alternative way of viewing the region: not

as separate and remote, a faraway land disconnected from the rest of the United States, but rather a space vitally connected to national and even global ecosystems, a landscape valued not only for its special and unique qualities but also because of its crucial links to places closer to home. From this perspective, which often exists uneasily with other ideas presented in the Banerjee exhibition and the companion catalog, the Alaskan Arctic should not be considered the last frontier, but instead a place intimately tied to the history and ecology of the modern world.⁵

Banerjee's photography glorifies the Arctic, makes the refuge appear as a hallowed place deserving protection. This approach would seem to follow that of other American artists who venerated wild landscapes in the hopes of arousing powerful emotional responses in their audiences. Using the camera to visualize their faith in nature, photographers like Ansel Adams filtered their emotions through the machine, creating iconic images that shaped modern perceptions of the natural world. Banerjee indeed locates himself within this tradition and often describes the Arctic in spiritual and emotional terms. Yet even as his photographs portray the refuge as sacred, Banerjee also reimagines the wilderness as part of larger ecological systems, not an enclave set apart from modern life. This idea of connectedness, one shared by a growing number of ecologists and environmental activists, respects the distinctive qualities of the refuge while also reincorporating it into a broader vision of global ecology. Viewers of the Smithsonian show probably found it difficult, if not impossible, to glean this idea from the photographs, as the museum's deletion of the captions effectively silenced this theme. Yet the full exhibit, revived by the California Academy of Sciences, matches texts with images in an innovative manner to reveal Banerjee's ecological emphasis, thus marking an important departure from the traditional way of looking at the American wilderness.⁶

For Subhankar Banerjee, the Arctic exhibit signaled the beginning of a new career. Born to a middle-class family in Calcutta, India, in 1967, Banerjee completed a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and then moved to the United States in 1990 to attend New Mexico State University, where he earned master's degrees in both physics and computer science. While he was in New Mexico, a backpacking trip through the Gila National Forest stirred his interest in the environment of the region. "In India I was a city boy," Banerjee writes. "[I]n the American Southwest I was drawn irresistibly to the wide-open spaces. I joined the Sierra Club and soon found myself hiking frequently in New Mexico's mountains." Banerjee began to take photography courses and to bring a camera along on his hikes. "Nature was now my classroom," he explains, "and my new path was capturing images of wild things on film."⁷

Yet this new path remained a hobby for many years, as Banerjee concentrated on pursuing his scientific career, first at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico and later at the Boeing Company in Seattle. In the meantime, he traveled frequently across much of North America, hoping to experience different wilderness settings and to improve his photographic skills. Banerjee cites one moment in particular as representing the epiphany that would lead him to quit his lucrative job and journey for more than a

year through the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. In the fall of 2000, he visited Churchill, in northern Manitoba, Canada, to take pictures of polar bears. It was, he recalled, "an arresting moment. But I also saw too many people, each scrambling for pictures. My entire being became galvanized with the desire to witness polar bears in a wild landscape untrammelled by tourism or industry."⁸

Banerjee's displeasure at the crowds gazing at polar bears echoed a familiar complaint made by American nature writers and environmental advocates, who have often worried that tourism would render wild places inauthentic. Like Banerjee, they coupled this anxiety about the loss of wildness with a desire to find a new frontier where they could feel a sense of solitude, of being set apart from the masses and experiencing nature in its most authentic state.⁹ After he heard about the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Banerjee began to turn his eyes northward, to imagine polar bears crossing the ice and to envision himself standing alone in nature, far from the crowds.

Banerjee's view of ANWR was undoubtedly shaped by his involvement with the Sierra Club and other environmental organizations, which have promoted a vision of the Arctic as a sacred domain not yet corrupted by civilization. Indeed, many commentators have described ANWR as a remnant of the original frontier, the only remaining outpost of untrammelled nature in the United States. *National Wildlife* magazine, in a pair of articles published in the 1990s, defined the region as both a "Fragile Frontier" and the "Last Frontier."¹⁰ In a similar fashion, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the government agency responsible for managing the refuge, emphasizes the frontier myth in its ANWR pamphlet. Distributed at the entrance to the Banerjee show at the Burke Museum in Seattle, where I saw the exhibit, the pamphlet celebrates the refuge as "a frontier—perhaps America's last—like those that helped shape America's distinct cultural heritage. Here conditions exist like those that once surrounded and shaped us—as individuals and as a Nation."¹¹ Likewise, when the Sierra Club announced its 2005 guided trip through the refuge, the trip leader evoked frontier rhetoric of discovery and exploration: "You can imagine yourself having been dropped into a time machine," he claimed, "and going back a few centuries to when Europeans were just starting to explore the North American continent."¹² In each of these examples, ANWR appears as a landscape of frontier nostalgia, removed not only in space but also in time from the contemporary United States. Tapping into sentiments voiced by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner back in 1893, environmental advocates today celebrate the frontier conditions of ANWR, qualities they believe remain essential to the maintenance of American national identity.

Less than six months after Banerjee's epiphany in Manitoba, he quit his job, liquidated his retirement account, and headed for the Alaskan Arctic, hoping to produce a comprehensive photographic record of the wildlife refuge during all four seasons. Meanwhile, a newly inaugurated George W. Bush tried to fulfill his campaign promise to make drilling in ANWR a centerpiece of his national energy policy. Banerjee's decision to travel through the Arctic thus coincided with a renewed effort, spearheaded by Bush and other Republicans, to clear the way for oil production in the region.

The ongoing debate over ANWR centers on its northernmost section, the coastal plain along the Beaufort Sea. Established in 1960, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge doubled in size twenty years later, with much of its area at that time designated as permanent wilderness. Yet the coastal plain did not receive this added protection and instead remained in legislative limbo, its eventual fate to be decided when Congress could either extend wilderness status or allow oil development there. Presidents Reagan and Bush père both pushed for drilling, but the infamous *Exxon Valdez* disaster in 1989, in which ten million gallons of oil spilled into southern Alaska's Prince William Sound, made this position politically untenable. The issue lay relatively dormant for a few years, cropping up again in 1995 when Congress approved a pro-drilling measure, roundly vetoed by President Clinton. The ascendancy of George W. Bush, together with a Republican majority in both houses of Congress, reactivated the debate and reenergized the hopes of drilling proponents.¹³

Banerjee claims that he did not consider his journey to the Arctic, at least initially, to be a "political quest."¹⁴ No doubt aware of the raging debate in Washington, D.C., he nevertheless viewed his photographic excursion primarily in personal terms, an opportunity, he says, to find "a place that would inspire me." Still, his effort to photograph the wildlife refuge was inherently political, for he hoped to convey the beauty of this remote land to a wider public. His goal, he explains in the exhibition catalog, was "to capture images that evoke emotion and inspire the audience to care."¹⁵ Banerjee, who until that time had spent much of his adult life studying and working in scientific fields, frequently stresses the feelings and emotions that enliven his photography. "Science definitely helped me immensely to deal with the equipment, the weather and the conditions," he explains, "but I feel science creates a very rational mind, and I just wanted my passion to take over. When you look at the work, it's very much from the soul."¹⁶

Banerjee's emphasis on the emotions evoked by ANWR stands in sharp contrast to the view of drilling proponents, who disparage any claims made by environmentalists regarding the coastal plain's scenic beauty. Gale Norton, Bush's Secretary of the Interior, described the area as a "flat, white nothingness."¹⁷ Standing before his Senate colleagues, Frank Murkowski, a Republican from Alaska, held up a blank white poster and argued that it gave them an accurate and complete glimpse of the coastal plain, a place devoid of any aesthetic value.¹⁸

Banerjee saw it as his mission to challenge this view of the Arctic landscape. If drilling proponents claimed that it was a frozen wasteland of nothingness, especially during the long winter months, then he would spend all four seasons in ANWR, using his camera to reveal the vibrant presence of life throughout the year. His effort to record seasonal change linked his project to an established tradition in environmental art and literature. Throughout American cultural history, a number of nature writers, including Henry David Thoreau and Joseph Wood Krutch, along with influential artists such as Sierra Club photographer Eliot Porter, all tried to understand the passage of time in particular landscapes. For these individuals, the four seasons offered the opportunity to appreciate

the subtle, biological changes that characterize the ecology of a place. Likewise, by photographing seasonal change in the Arctic, Banerjee hoped to immerse viewers not only in the aesthetics of the landscape but also its community of life. He wanted them to recognize that the wildlife refuge, even in the depths of winter, sustained vast numbers of creatures. Using the motif of the four seasons, he wanted them to consider the difference between the temporality of nature, governed by ongoing cycles, and the temporality of modern society, marked by restless, linear change.¹⁹

After spending fourteen months in the Arctic and producing a huge collection of photographs, Banerjee lined up an impressive roster of nature writers, scientists, and environmental activists to contribute essays to an exhibition catalog, for which he secured a contract from the Seattle-based Mountaineers Books. His work also piqued the interest of a program official at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, who decided to plan a major exhibition of Banerjee's photographs to open in May 2003. Banerjee was promised a coveted spot, Hall 10, just off the main rotunda where the massive elephant killed by Teddy Roosevelt welcomes visitors to the museum. The show would feature approximately fifty of his photographs, along with lengthy descriptive and interpretive captions situating the images within their ecological and historical contexts.²⁰

But these plans changed dramatically following Senator Boxer's remarks on March 19. Two weeks later, Banerjee learned that the show would be moved from its prime spot on the main floor to a narrow corridor downstairs behind an escalator. Once it opened, many visitors would find it difficult even to locate the exhibition space. As one museum volunteer explained to another reviewer, "unless you get lost, you'll never find it."²¹ In addition to changing the venue, the museum also informed Banerjee that the captions would be almost entirely eliminated. Rather than providing viewers with any meaningful context, they would offer only the most basic information. Captions that originally contained several sentences would be scaled back to one or two phrases that merely identified the scenes, such as "McCall Glacier: Brooks Range." Smithsonian attorneys then wrote letters to Banerjee and his publisher demanding that future editions of the exhibition catalog remove "any and all references to the Smithsonian Institution or a Smithsonian-sponsored exhibition."²²

These developments stunned Banerjee as well as a number of politicians who believed the Smithsonian's decision smacked of censorship and replicated other recent museum controversies on the National Mall. Senator Richard Durbin, a Democrat from Illinois, issued a press release in which he recounted the extensive planning that lay behind the show and then lambasted the museum for the sudden changes that had taken place. "Just a few days after Senator Boxer mentioned Banerjee's book during a policy debate on the Senate floor," Durbin charged, "the artist was informed the exhibit was being moved to the basement and all the explanatory material was being deleted. You don't have to have a degree in museum studies to figure out something fishy happened."²³ Museum officials claimed that no political pressure was exerted upon them, but nevertheless they felt that Senator Boxer's speech had "politicized" the photographs and, for that reason, they

decided to strip away any material they deemed too political.²⁴

A wide range of newspapers all across the United States soon expressed support for Banerjee and outrage at the Smithsonian. The *Los Angeles Times*, responding to the museum's disavowal of outside pressure, sarcastically opined: "Whatever."²⁵ An editorial in the *St. Petersburg Times* compared the issue with the 1995 *Enola Gay* controversy, which resulted in the National Air and Space Museum caving in to political pressure by displaying, without any contextual framework, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. "When history is rewritten or distorted to make us feel better," the paper argued, "we are collectively diminished."²⁶ Other commentators connected the controversy to what they viewed as the decline of free expression and open debate during the Bush presidency. Timothy Cahill, writing for the *Times Union* in Albany, New York, argued that "the incident" was "part of a relentless assault on free speech, free thought and dissent that has spread like a cancer since the 2000 election. There is a terror at large that wants to control what we see, think and know. Truth lies bleeding."²⁷ In a letter to the editor, one reader offered "kudos" to Cahill for revealing "the chilling effect of politics on the venerable Smithsonian Institution." "I hope this assault on free speech will not be tolerated," the reader continued, "and that other galleries not beholden to the Bush administration will exhibit his work. It is ironic that we send troops to Iraq in the name of democracy, but seem to have trouble accepting free speech at home. A mature democracy can tolerate dissent."²⁸

Angered by the Smithsonian's treatment of Banerjee, officials at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco offered to sponsor the exhibit, with the original captions intact. The revived show opened to rave reviews in September 2003, generating even more media exposure for Banerjee. Ever since, the full exhibition of forty-nine photographs, along with a smaller version featuring thirty images, has been traveling around the United States. Banerjee's work has been displayed primarily in natural history and science museums, including prominent venues such as the Field Museum in Chicago and the American Museum of Natural History in New York, but has also appeared in a number of art galleries and museums in cities ranging from Grand Rapids, Michigan, to Santa Fe, New Mexico. These various sites suggest that Banerjee's photography straddles the line between art and science, that it manages to capture the ecology of the Arctic while also offering audiences an aesthetic vision of the natural world.

Banerjee himself uses both of these discourses to describe his work. Although he often comments on the limits of scientific rationality and emphasizes the spiritual content of his images, he also places his work in the documentary tradition, describing it as an effort to provide "the first-ever documentation of this place."²⁹ Referencing the popular myth of photographic truth, he claims that he wanted to make distant Arctic scenes accessible to American audiences—to use the camera as a device to register reality and depict the natural world in an accurate and objective manner. Yet he also hoped to elicit an emotional response in viewers. "In essence," he explains, "my Arctic study is both documentary, because it documents the important ecological and cultural aspects of the

refuge, and at the same time it is art, because it is a meditative study of the fragility and vulnerability of a remote and harsh landscape."³⁰ Blending scientific knowledge with spiritual sentiment, Banerjee hoped that his photography could convey both the ecological reality of ANWR as well as the intense emotion he experienced there.

Banerjee's captions, restored to the show by the California Academy of Sciences, reveal a similar fusion of science and passion and provide a broader context within which to view the photographs. Indeed, a reviewer for the *Washington Post* complained that the lack of substantive captions rendered the Smithsonian exhibition "toothless" and drained much of the meaning from Banerjee's project. "What is strange," the reviewer explained, "is that, unless a visitor knew beforehand what is at stake here, he would have no clue why Banerjee took these pictures, except perhaps to sell calendars."³¹ Still, other reviewers believed that even without the captions the show provided powerful evidence against drilling. "It's not likely," New Jersey's Bergen County *Record* observed, "that . . . viewers will come away convinced that drilling in the refuge is worth losing one of the last places on earth that is still a true—and sacred—wilderness."³² The response to the Smithsonian show, as this comment suggests, reinforced the traditional view of the ANWR debate: a contest between beauty and oil, the aesthetics of wilderness versus the economics of drilling.

Yet the exhibition circulated by the California Academy of Sciences, enhanced by the more detailed captions, recasts the debate in an entirely different mold. Together, the images and texts move beyond competing frontier visions of ANWR—a battle over whether to preserve therapeutic wilderness or exploit economic resources—to frame the landscape instead as a place that is connected to everyday life in the rest of the United States and beyond. The controversy triggered by the Smithsonian show would probably lead one to assume that Banerjee's captions directly comment upon the ANWR debate, but that is simply not the case. Indeed, I was quite surprised to find that the issue of oil drilling was never explicitly mentioned in the show. Moreover, the arguments often advanced by environmentalists against drilling—the relative paucity of oil available there (according to many estimates, about a six-month supply for the United States); the declining fuel economy of the nation's automobiles, particularly in the age of the SUV, which has dramatically increased the demand for oil; and their belief that energy independence could more readily be gained from conservation than from drilling in Alaska—are not even hinted at by the captions. (These issues, however, are addressed by the catalog.) But if the show does not dwell on the political and economic context of ANWR, a topic that would certainly have raised even more hackles in Washington, D.C., it instead outlines a context too often missing from the debate: the broader ecology of the landscape, including its surprising links to faraway ecosystems.

From the beginning, the exhibition introduces this ecological perspective through captions that describe how global warming has altered the region. These effects would not be immediately apparent to the viewer of Banerjee's photographs, so the texts provide a counterpoint to the images, blending science with aesthetics in unexpected ways. The

second photograph in the show, a shot of the McCall Glacier in the towering mountains of the Brooks Range, seems to partake of the sublime tradition. On the surface, Banerjee joins a long line of artists—from nineteenth-century painters like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran through twenty-century photographers like Ansel Adams—in presenting mountains as sacred landscapes that occupy a realm separate from the profane space of human society. Yet the caption points toward a different view. "McCall Glacier," it explains, "has lost nearly thirty-three feet in depth over the past four decades. . . [and] is one of the most extensively studied glaciers in the circumpolar north for signs of climate change due to global warming." The text suggests that even this remote setting in Alaska should not be viewed as a place apart, cut off from modern culture. Instead, the changes to the McCall Glacier indicate that this region is profoundly affected by political and economic decisions made far from the Arctic.

This approach to global warming runs throughout the exhibit, as the captions often challenge and undercut the aesthetic presuppositions embedded in the images. In museum exhibits, wall captions usually expand upon the content of images or objects, providing details that reinforce, rather than contradict, the meanings suggested by the items on display. Banerjee's treatment of global warming uses captions in a completely different manner. In these juxtapositions of text and image, beauty and ecology collide, producing rich dialectics of meaning.

A perfect illustration of this strategy appears in the autumn section of the exhibit. Taken on a cloudy day, a photograph of "Fleeting Autumn" in the Chandalar River Valley portrays trees ablaze in colors of red, orange, and yellow, set off against a placid blue lake (fig. 2). This image, like much of Banerjee's work, makes use of subdued lighting to concentrate on the changing details of biological life. While the photograph on its own would appear as a snapshot of autumnal beauty, a moment of seasonal change captured by the camera, the text forces viewers to question this obvious reading. The caption suggests that these species—the dwarf birch and golden willow—are new arrivals to this part of the Arctic, moving northward because of the effects of global warming. Rather than offering a transparent image of natural beauty, the photograph, in conjunction with the text, prompts viewers to ask whether the presence of these trees should be considered an emblem of pure wilderness or instead a product of human history. While Banerjee's work contemplates the cyclical time of nature, this image carries other meanings, reflecting not just seasonal change but also the environmental history of the modern world, a history that has produced global warming and led the dwarf birch and golden willow to migrate further north.

Banerjee has described his aesthetic style as a cross between Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter, two Sierra Club artists who, like him, used photography to galvanize concern for wilderness preservation. To a certain extent, this comparison works, not necessarily for each individual image, but rather for the show as a whole, which displays a mix of the wide, panoramic views so often employed by Adams and the close, detailed studies of nature emphasized by Porter.³³ Banerjee's photographs, like the work of Adams, often

feature the sky, an approach eschewed by Porter, who preferred to concentrate on minute particulars closer to the ground. Porter tended to flatten space, eliminating the depth of vision usually associated with landscape photography, to present viewers with fragments of the natural world. While many of Banerjee's photographs use the technique of perspective to draw the viewer toward a central point, other images challenge this artistic convention. A photograph of a polar bear den portrays the bears' tracks across the wintry plain, paw prints fleetingly etched in the snow (fig. 3). Unlike most landscape photographs, the image does not invite the viewer inside the space. Instead of offering an eye-level observation point, it tilts toward the ground, making the viewer feel like a visitor or intruder into a space where human needs and desires no longer dominate.

Banerjee also follows Porter in choosing the medium of color photography as a way to record seasonal change, in contrast to Adams's preference for black and white. His use of color helps counter the notion of ANWR as a lifeless, barren landscape, a vast white nothingness. In Banerjee's photographs, the Arctic appears not as an empty monochrome, but as pulsing with life, a diverse environment marked by subtle gradations of color and tone throughout the year. Even the much-maligned whiteness of the landscape yields a variety of shades and hues, along with occasional pockets of color that expand Banerjee's palette.

Banerjee took a number of photographs while flying in an airplane, looking down upon the land. In one of these pictures, a shot of caribou migrating across a frozen river, the aerial perspective reveals vast expanses of ice and snow that stretch beyond the boundaries of the frame (fig. 4). While whiteness dominates the scene, broad patches of blue ice offer unexpected swirls of color glistening amid the frozen surround. The panoramic view from above conveys a sense of openness, suggesting the wide spaces of the Arctic and the long distances traveled by the caribou. Although the animals are large deer distinguished by their enormous antlers, they appear tiny and almost antlike in the photograph, with few of their features detectable to the viewer. Like Banerjee, many wildlife photographers and filmmakers have used aerial vision to situate animals within their larger ecological fabric. Rather than isolating individual creatures, this perspective provides a glimpse of the web of life that encompasses different species and their environments.³⁴ In this case, as the catalog explains, the pregnant caribou "move with a sense of purpose and determination to reach the coastal plain in time to calve."³⁵ The text and image suggest the caribou's dependence upon the coastal plain, the key area targeted for drilling, and imply that radical alteration of the habitat could threaten the survival of a tremendous herd of animals. By viewing the caribou from such a distance, a perspective that makes the individual creatures seem miniscule, the photograph emphasizes the vast numbers that populate the ecosystem, long lines of caribou extending into the space beyond. The image does not call for sympathy for individual caribou, does not, unlike much popular nature photography, present animals as cute and cuddly, but instead triggers a different kind of emotive response, one that encourages viewers to feel that tampering with an environment that sustains this many creatures would be an unconscionable act.

Banerjee's ecological perspective also incorporates human beings into the picture, portraying the Arctic not as an untouched wilderness, but rather as a space where people have developed complex relationships with their environment. The exhibit and catalog both emphasize the importance of the caribou herd to the Gwich'in people, who live in an area just south of the refuge and also to the east in the Canadian Arctic. The disruption of the caribou habitat from drilling would spell potential disaster for the animals and thereby threaten a crucial food source and cultural tradition of the Gwich'in. While some readers might criticize Banerjee for romanticizing native communities and engaging in the familiar fantasy of the Ecological Indian, he recognizes that indigenous groups are active agents in their environment. Instead of portraying them as passive beings capable only of genuflecting before nature, Banerjee captures scenes of death and violence to illustrate how hunting rituals are woven into the fabric of community life. In one series of photographs, he leaves behind the sentimental portrayal of animals, a common feature in much environmentalist imagery, to record the butchering of a moose, with vivid shots of its red flesh being cut up and transported back to a Gwich'in village. In these ways, his ecological vision enables audiences to discern the interrelationships among humans, animals, and the environment, to see the Arctic as a landscape where people are not excluded, but instead form bonds of exchange and interdependence with the nonhuman world.

Banerjee's focus on human communities in the region extends as well to the Inupiat people, who live on the northern coast of Alaska. Although many environmentalists have condemned native peoples' continued practice of whale hunting, Banerjee presents this Inupiat tradition in sympathetic terms, recording a communal prayer and other rituals that follow a successful hunt. He also photographed a cemetery containing several crosses and a pair of bowhead whale jawbones rising out of the snow (fig. 5). The jawbones seem to converge, forming an arc that marks an entrance to the grave areas. The sharp verticality of one jawbone reaches toward the top of the frame, overpowering the crosses, but is also mimicked by their geometric forms that stretch toward the horizon. In his caption, Banerjee emphasizes the spirituality of the space and the symbolism of the jawbones, encouraging viewers to consider the links between religious feeling and attitudes toward nature. "The cemetery," he observes, "is marked by a pair of bowhead whale jawbones; the scene is silent. This is a sign of reverence, I think—a sign of the relationship the Inupiat have with the whale."

Banerjee thus emphasizes the significance of whale hunting to Inupiat culture and also portrays, in other images, how human actions constitute vital components of the ecological system. Even the polar bear photograph displayed by Barbara Boxer, a portrait of a single bear walking across the ice, reveals these linkages and interrelationships (see fig. 1). Rather than portraying pure wilderness unaffected by people, the photograph, as the caption explains, shows the bear moving toward whale bones left from the Inupiat hunt the previous autumn. Their remains, "consumed by polar and grizzly bears, Arctic foxes and gulls," thus convey the interdependence of humans and nature, turning this image of a lone animal roaming the landscape into a broader vision of the regional ecology.

Banerjee's effort to offer a holistic picture of the Arctic environment, one that encompasses people and the natural world, sometimes runs counter to other themes in the show, especially the idea of wilderness as a pristine space apart from human society. This concept, long employed by mainstream conservation groups, draws on the frontier myth to imagine nature as a therapeutic retreat from industrial civilization, an anomalous zone of freedom that can alleviate the problems and tensions of modern life. A number of captions, including quotations by Margaret Murie and George B. Schaller, who both played crucial roles in the creation of ANWR, evoke the wilderness ideal, describing the refuge as "untouched," a place where "one can recapture the rhythm of life and the feeling of belonging to the natural world." These comments, together with Banerjee's remark about imagining himself "being transported back to the Pleistocene era," situate the Arctic in the distant past and evoke ideas of time travel to make it appear as a place offering an escape from history.

The catalog furthers these sentiments, with former president Jimmy Carter celebrating ANWR as "a remnant of frontier America that our first settlers once called wilderness."³⁶ In a similar fashion, the ornithologist David Allen Sibley waxes nostalgic for the frontier. "I can imagine," he writes, describing a view from the Brooks Range, "that this is what it might have been like to stand just east of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado two hundred years ago: open prairie extending for hundreds of miles around, rivers and lakes and mountain peaks without names, birds and animals moving freely, without roads, power lines, houses, or shopping malls to divert them."³⁷ These passages present the Arctic as a place frozen in time, a blank space that provides the setting for imperial nostalgia, allowing contemporary Americans to feel like pioneers exploring the original frontier.

This appeal to purity, to a narrative of untouched nature, provides an attractive frame for many environmental groups. It offers a simple, bifurcated vision of unspoiled landscapes that need to be preserved in contrast to the polluted places where most people live and work. It encourages Americans to yearn for pristine wilderness, to imagine real, essential nature cordoned off from the modern world, protected from the corruptions and contradictions of history. Yet this view also distances people from nature by denying the links between humans and their environment. In the case of ANWR, this perspective obscures how much this landscape is tied to the rest of United States and, indeed, to much of the world.³⁸

Even though some of the texts in the show and catalog reinforce the notion of ANWR as remote and disconnected, Banerjee ultimately transcends the dualism that isolates Arctic nature from contemporary culture. Just as he reveals the effects of global warming on the region and portrays the human communities that inhabit the landscape, two subjects that undermine the idea of pure wilderness, Banerjee also emphasizes the importance of the refuge, especially its coastal plain, to more than 180 species of migratory birds. Traveling from almost every American state and from points much farther afield—Antarctica and South America, as well as parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa—the birds use the coastal plain either as their breeding ground or as a place of sustenance during part of the year.

These migratory patterns exemplify the links between distant ecosystems, suggesting that the Arctic is not so remote after all. "The tundra may seem like a world apart," Sibley observes in the catalog, "but to the birds, . . . every place is connected."³⁹

To portray migratory birds, Banerjee relies on two different representational strategies: aerial shots of large flocks and close studies of individual creatures. As he did with the caribou, Banerjee again uses the view from above to suggest the tremendous numbers of birds that depend upon the coastal plain for their survival. Photographs of snow geese, which migrate from Canada during autumn "to feed on cotton grass" and "build fat reserves" before wintering to the south, present the birds as tiny white flecks grouped together in random patterns. The geese float, as far as the eye can see, above the Jago River and the coastal plain, their whiteness a sharp contrast to the colors below—barren shades of gray and dark brown in one, radiant vistas of blue and orange in the other (fig. 6).

Banerjee intersperses panoramic photographs with detailed portraits of individual birds. Like Eliot Porter, who became widely renowned for his bird photography in the mid-twentieth century, Banerjee uses color to enable audiences to appreciate the distinct characteristics of different species and also tries to provide a sense of closeness and intimacy, making viewers feel part of the scene, as if the bird was right before their eyes. A photograph of a buff-breasted sandpiper shows the creature engaged in courtship display—standing erect, with wings outstretched to reveal its orange-yellow breast (fig. 7). Although Porter sought to record both birds and their surroundings in full focus, a technique Banerjee uses in many of his photographs, this image instead concentrates more on the bird itself.⁴⁰ The features of the foreground appear relatively clear, but the background becomes soft and fuzzy. The sandpiper's pose looks even more determined when placed against this blurry landscape.

Although the image does not fully capture the bird's setting, the caption situates it within a much broader context: its global migration pattern. "This species," the text explains, "a long-distance traveler that migrates each year from Argentina to the Arctic Refuge coastal plain to nest and rear its young, is one of the top five bird species at greatest risk if its habitat is disturbed." The caption encourages audiences to view the sandpiper within the different geographies that define its life course, to consider how Argentina and the Arctic are connected by its flight, and to feel concerned about its fate, particularly if drilling were to take place in the coastal plain. When Senator Durbin found out that this caption would be removed from the Smithsonian show, he was outraged, announcing to the *New York Times* and other papers: "I want the world to see the caption of the little bird that the Smithsonian says is too controversial for the public."⁴¹

In many ways, this image and its accompanying text encapsulate Banerjee's quietly subversive achievement. As *Vanity Fair* art critic Ingrid Sischy observed in a feature story on the photographer: "Banerjee is certainly not the first artist to produce an exhibition that scared a museum, but what is unusual is that, on the surface, his pictures are tame

and sweet."⁴² Indeed, the buff-breasted sandpiper photograph seems like the kind of innocent image that appears routinely in calendars and other such media as a sign of pure nature. Yet the caption urges audiences to see the bird as a creature that does not exist in some separate domain, apart from their own lives. According to Banerjee, the sandpiper offers a small glimpse of the interconnections that define the global environment. From this vantage point, the significance of ANWR extends far beyond its symbolic value as the last frontier of American wilderness. Rather than providing a retreat from modernity, a sequestered realm that operates in a different time and space, the refuge instead forms a vital link in a chain of relationships stretching from the Arctic to places around the globe.

In the current political climate, dominated by an administration that denies, despite the mounting evidence, the phenomenon of global warming, that dismisses energy conservation as a matter of personal virtue rather than national policy, that denigrates the refuge by describing it as a barren wasteland, Banerjee's exhibit and catalog offer a different way to see the Arctic, a perspective that challenges not only the worldview of conservative politicians but also the prevailing wilderness motifs deployed for a long time by mainstream environmental groups. Banerjee began his photographic excursion in a manner that followed other seekers of solitude, hoping, in his case, to see polar bears uncorrupted by the presence of crowds, to experience nature in its purest and most authentic state. By the time Senator Boxer displayed one of his polar bear pictures, Banerjee had moved beyond the dueling frontier visions that have tended to frame the debate over oil drilling. Perhaps he had realized as well that these visions ultimately reinforce one another, as they both portray ANWR as a remote place, disconnected from everyday life. Banerjee's striking aesthetic compositions, together with his attention to ecological context, reframe the Arctic landscape and question some of the reigning assumptions about the relationship between nature and culture in modern America. As the show continues to circulate around the United States, many viewers will likely feel that his work brings them closer to the Arctic, not only by offering memorable portrayals of the refuge, but also by repeatedly reminding them of the ties that bind this distant land to their own lives.

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Endnotes

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1. A brief snippet of Boxer's speech, including this quotation, can be heard on the National Public Radio Web site for the story titled "Smithsonian Defends Move on ANWR Photos," *All Things Considered*, May 20, 2003,

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1269389> (accessed October 3, 2005).

2. Boxer quoted in Elizabeth Shogren, "Heat Turned Up on Arctic Exhibit?" *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 2003.

3. For background on the Smithsonian controversy, see also Ingrid Sischy, "The Smithsonian's Big Chill," *Vanity Fair*, December 2003, 242–56; and Timothy W. Luke, "Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land, a Photographic Journey," *The Public Historian* 26 (Winter 2004): 193–201.

4. For a complete listing of venues that have displayed Banerjee's work, see the photographer's Web site: <http://wwbphoto.com/exhibits.html> (accessed October 17, 2005).

5. For a perceptive analysis of the prevalence of frontier discourse in American literary responses to Alaska, see Susan Kollin, *Nature's State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

6. On the importance of the emotions and spirituality to environmental image making, see Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For a succinct discussion of the impact of ecological thought on contemporary nature writing, see Daniel J. Philippon, *Conserving Words: How American Nature Writers Shaped the Environmental Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 266–77. Philippon focuses here on the metaphor of the island, a term not used by Banerjee, but one that could express his ecological view of ANWR.

7. Subhankar Banerjee, "Introduction," in Subhankar Banerjee, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land* (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2003), 16.

8. Banerjee, "Introduction," 17.

9. For a discussion of this issue, see Kollin, *Nature's State*, chap. 1. **[End Page 179]**

10. Lisa Drew, "Caring About Alaska: Who Does? And Why?" *National Wildlife*, April/May 1996, 30; and Bert Gildart, "Hunting for Their Future," *National Wildlife*, October/November 1997, 21.

11. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, "Arctic National Wildlife Refuge" (October 2002), n.p.

12. Dashka Slater, "Where the Wild Things Are," *Sierra*, March/April 2005, 33.

13. For background information on ANWR and the current debate, see, for example, Peter Matthiessen, "In the Great Country," in *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*, 40–57.
14. Brandon Griggs, "From Arctic Refuge to Utah Deserts, a Focus on Fragile Lands," *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 31, 2004.
15. Subhankar Banerjee, "Photographer's Notes," in *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*, 172.
16. Natasha Gural, "Fuel for Debate," *Tulsa World*, September 16, 2004.
17. Norton quoted in Liz Ruskin, "ANWR Exhibit Opens Quietly at Smithsonian," *Anchorage Daily News*, May 3, 2003.
18. Murkowski's use of the poster can be seen in a recent documentary film: *Oil on Ice*, DVD, directed by Dale Djerassi and Bo Boudart (2004; Burbank, Calif.: Warner Home Video, 2005).
19. On the seasons as an organizing device in environmental literature, see Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 7. For a broad study of the four seasons in American cultural history, see Michael Kammen, *A Time to Every Purpose: The Four Seasons in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). On Eliot Porter's photography of the seasons, see Dunaway, *Natural Visions*, chap. 6.
20. On these developments, see Sischy, "The Smithsonian's Big Chill"; and Luke, "Arctic National Wildlife Refuge."
21. Volunteer quoted in Luke, "Arctic National Wildlife Refuge," 197.
22. Letter quoted in Sischy, "The Smithsonian's Big Chill," 254.
23. Durbin press release quoted in Luke, "Arctic National Wildlife Refuge," 195–96.
24. Quotation from Ruskin, "ANWR Exhibit Opens Quietly at Smithsonian."
25. "Some Scary Pictures," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2003.
26. "Tampering with Treasures," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 24, 2003.
27. Timothy Cahill, "Politics Storms the Smithsonian," *Times Union* (Albany, N.Y.), May 18, 2003.

28. Terry Rodrigues, letter to editor, *Times Union*, May 24, 2003.
29. Shogren, "Heat Turned Up on Arctic Exhibit?"
30. "A Conversation with Subhankar Banerjee," in Subhankar Banerjee, *The Last Wilderness: Photographs of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge* (New York: Gerald Peters Gallery, 2004), n.p.
31. Michael O'Sullivan, "Words Fail Banerjee Show," *Washington Post*, May 23, 2003.
32. "Dangerous Photos: Did Smithsonian Hide Arctic Wildlife Exhibit?" *The Record* (Bergen County, N.J.), May 6, 2003.
33. For more on the careers of Adams and Porter, including their involvement with the Sierra Club, see Dunaway, *Natural Visions*, chaps. 5–7. In addition, see the insightful essays by John B. Rohrbach and Rebecca Solnit in *Eliot Porter: The Color of Wildness* (New York: Aperture, in association with the Amon Carter Museum, 2001).
34. On the use of panoramic vision in wildlife films, see Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), especially chap. 4.
35. Banerjee, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*, 37.
36. Jimmy Carter, "Foreword," in *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*, 13.
37. David Allen Sibley, "Visiting the Birds at Their Summer Home," in *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*, 105.
38. For an important critique of the wilderness ideal, see William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 69–90.
39. Sibley, "Visiting the Birds at Their Summer Home," 106.
40. For a discussion of Eliot Porter's bird photography, including his efforts to capture the surroundings of birds in full focus, see John B. Rohrbach, *A Passion for Birds: Eliot Porter's Photography* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1997).
41. Durbin as quoted in Timothy Egan, "Smithsonian Is No Safe Haven for Exhibit on Arctic Wildlife Refuge," *New York Times*, May 2, 2003.
42. Sischy, "The Smithsonian's Big Chill," 242.