

FROM DEFENDING THE ARCTIC REFUGE: A PHOTOGRAPHER, AN INDIGENOUS NATION, AND A FIGHT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE BY FINIS DUNAWAY. COPYRIGHT © 2021 BY FINIS DUNAWAY. USED BY PERMISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS. [WWW.UNCPRESS.ORG](http://WWW.UNCPRESS.ORG)

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## Prologue

I don't make a habit of going to funerals, especially for people I've never met. So I feel a little sheepish finding a seat in one of the back rows of the Foscoe Community Center. It's late October 2014 in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, and more than 100 people have filed into the spacious, sunlit room for this memorial service. Jeans, sweaters, and flannel shirts predominate among the guests. Many hail from nearby communities like Boone, but others have come from elsewhere, including a representative of the Gwich'in Nation all the way from Alaska. A slate of speakers describes the deceased as their mentor and their brother. They share stories about how he inspired people to join struggles for justice. Some marvel at the unlikely chain of events that brought us together that day. It all started almost three decades earlier when Lenny Kohm journeyed to the Arctic and then somehow became a quietly legendary activist.

In 1987, Lenny Kohm's life became entangled with the epic political battle over the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Tucked away in the northeastern corner of Alaska, the Arctic Refuge has been the focus of the longest running public land debate in North American history. Initially set aside in 1960, the refuge provides life-sustaining habitat for caribou, polar bears, migratory birds, and other species. For decades, though, the fossil fuel industry and powerful politicians have pushed to turn this unique ecosystem into an oil field. A former drummer and aspiring photographer with no previous background in political organizing, the forty-seven-year-old Kohm had a sudden revelation in the Arctic. He returned to his home in California, determined to do whatever he could to protect the refuge. Along with some friends, he launched a small grassroots group and put together a multimedia slide show called *The Last Great Wilderness*. For the next two decades, Kohm took the show on the road. Teaming up with Gwich'in spokespeople from Alaska and Canada, he gave as many as 200 presentations per year across the United States.

I was beginning to research the history of the Arctic Refuge debate when I came across a brief profile of Kohm in an environmental magazine. Intrigued by his unusual story, I started writing Kohm a letter in August 2014 to ask if I could interview him. I paused to do more research and then finished the letter in October. Before hitting send, I Googled his name one more time, just to make sure I had the right email address. The first link to appear was his obituary: Lenny Kohm had died at his home in Todd, North Carolina, on September 25, 2014. He was 74.

I was stunned to read the news. The next day, I ended up talking with a friend of his for almost an hour. Near the end of our conversation, he offhandedly mentioned that he was giving the eulogy at Lenny's memorial on Saturday. And, by the way, he said, if there's any way that you can make it down, it would be wonderful to have you here. I wasn't sure how to respond and didn't know if it would be appropriate to attend. He understood my concerns but encouraged me to come anyway. The service would not be a somber occasion, he said, but a celebration of Lenny's life. Just before saying goodbye, he insisted, "Lenny would want you to be there."

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Exactly one month after Lenny Kohm's death, the Foscoe Community Center was decorated with some of his most treasured possessions. Resting on a table were the two slide projectors he carried with him as he crisscrossed the country; displayed on the stone mantelpiece were his trusty Pentax camera and a beaded, floral-patterned caribou skin vest given to him by Indigenous people from the North.

Speaking on behalf of the Gwich'in Nation, Luci Beach said that "all of our hearts are heavy for our brother, our uncle, our grandpa." She talked about the deep connection Lenny formed with Gwich'in communities and praised his photographs of her people. "He saw us as part of the landscape," she explained. He also "knew how to listen, how to really, really listen." Beach was one of approximately fifty Gwich'in representatives who had traveled with him on slide show tours, and she talked about her experiences on the road. "He let us be our own spokespeople," she continued. "He never told us what to say." And she announced, "If it wasn't for Lenny, I really think there would be drilling in the Arctic Refuge right now."

At the potluck dinner that followed, several people repeated this claim to me: Lenny and his *Last Great Wilderness* show prevented oil drilling from happening in the refuge. I must confess that I felt skeptical. Surely, they were exaggerating. (And who among us has not engaged in hyperbole at a funeral?) Still, the questions gnawed at me: Could Lenny's low-budget tours have made that much of a difference in such a high-profile environmental debate? Could a traveling slide show really have protected the Arctic Refuge?

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When I left the memorial, I had no idea I would spend the next five years chasing down sources and talking with people across the continent about Lenny's activism. I had come to North Carolina thinking that I might write a chapter about his slide show as part of a broader history of the refuge debate. Yet for reasons I cannot fully explain, I found myself becoming fascinated—and ultimately obsessed—with this story.

It all happened gradually. I started going to libraries and archives, where I pored through boxes and files, looking for materials about Arctic Refuge campaigns. Whenever I stumbled across a stray document that referenced *The Last Great Wilderness*, I could feel my heart rate quicken. The paper trail was elusive—a few letters here, the occasional tour itinerary there. I spent hours that sometimes turned into days in the offices and storage rooms of environmental and Indigenous organizations. I went to the homes of activists, where I rummaged through files and boxes tucked away in garages and basements. I combed through newspapers—especially smaller-market, local papers—to gather coverage of *Last Great Wilderness* shows. I visited Gwich'in communities and ate caribou. I searched for any clues that could help me understand the strange career of Lenny Kohm.

I relished the mysteries. Who was Lenny Kohm, this man I failed to meet? "There is no explanation for Lenny," one of his close friends said at the memorial. "He would have wanted it that way." He was

a “bearded jazz drummer” who “forsook his drumsticks for a camera and found soul anyway.” He was a “Jewish leprechaun, who charmed the Gwich’in elders” and “became an organizer driven by love for the land, the land of the caribou.” Later, he reinvented himself again, becoming a “mountain man and the voice of the untopped Appalachians, of the creeks and of the hollows.” I wondered about these dramatic changes: What inspired Lenny to leave California for a life on the road? Why did he become so dedicated to this cause, and how did he stay motivated to keep touring year after year? I also wondered how he ended up in North Carolina and why he became involved in the fight against mountaintop removal coal mining. In describing Lenny, his friends and colleagues often emphasized his humble disposition and keen sense of humor. I understood these traits better when I found a photograph of him, wearing fire-engine-red long johns and a floppy blue hat in the Arctic—a goofy environmental gnome looking back at the camera (fig. P.1). Lenny included this slide in *The Last Great Wilderness*. The only picture of him in the show, it must have elicited laughs whenever it flashed on the screen.

Lenny drew me into this story, but I did not want to write a conventional biography that detailed the entirety of his life. Instead, I wanted to understand how Lenny and the slide show left their mark on the broader sweep of the Arctic Refuge struggle. One of the most striking features of this campaign is how it has brought together people of diverse backgrounds—including Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples—into effective coalitions with the common goal of defending the refuge. I wondered what role Lenny played in the formation of alliances between environmentalists and Indigenous peoples. How did he build trust with Gwich’in communities? What did Gwich’in leaders see in him, and why did they decide to send representatives on slide show tours? I also wondered how the show helped build support for the refuge and whether it influenced key votes on Capitol Hill. How did Lenny and other refuge defenders encourage people far from the Arctic to care about this place? How did they deal with the changing political dynamics in Washington, DC? What impact did the *Last Great Wilderness* show have, and what legacies did Lenny leave behind?

I followed up with folks I met at the memorial and contacted many others whose lives were touched, even changed, by the show. I spoke with Gwich’in representatives who journeyed from remote villages above the Arctic Circle to travel with him and speak at slide show events all across the lower forty-eight. I talked with local organizers who helped plan and promote the show when Lenny visited their communities. I interviewed lobbyists and other staff members of DC-based environmental groups who helped coordinate his tours.

For a year, I tried to track down a physical copy of the *Last Great Wilderness* show until I began to despair that I would never find it. Lenny’s massive collection of Kodachrome slides was being kept at a friend’s house outside of Boone. But no one knew whether the original show—which featured slides as well as a soundtrack with music and narration—was still intact and available anywhere. The following summer, on the far corner of a bookshelf at the Northern Alaska Environmental Center in Fairbanks, Alaska, I spotted a large binder labeled “LGW Slide Show.” Opening it up, I found it was filled with plastic storage sheets containing slides from the show. (The Northern Center, I learned, had sponsored many activists on slide show tours over the years, using a duplicate copy of *The Last Great Wilderness*.) I also learned that a local volunteer was planning—at some point—to digitize the slides. But several slides were missing, and it was unclear whether anyone in Fairbanks had a copy of the show’s music and narration. Then, as I turned to the final sheet of the binder, I found a slide listing the show’s credits. I placed it on a light box and took note of the name Richard Dale, who was credited with producing the soundtrack. When I contacted him, I was ecstatic to learn not only that he had another copy of the slides (only three sets of *The Last Great Wilderness* were ever made) but also that he had digitized the full show—including the soundtrack. When I visited Richard in

California a few months later, he gave me a digital copy of the show I had been searching for [visit <https://defendingthearcticrefuge.com/slideshow/>].

As I began to piece together Lenny's story, I came to see *The Last Great Wilderness*—a source that could easily be lost to history—as a remarkable experiment in citizen democracy and grassroots activism. During his many years on the road, Lenny was never quoted in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, his slide show tours never covered by *Time* or *Newsweek*. Yet his story is essential to understanding how the Arctic Refuge became so meaningful to so many Americans.

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We tend to think of images as having the most power when they are seen by the most people. Singular, iconic pictures—such as Dorothea Lange's Depression-era photograph *Migrant Mother* or NASA's *Blue Marble* image of the whole earth—are celebrated for their capacity to crystallize a cultural moment, shape public consciousness, even alter the course of history. In contrast, the *Last Great Wilderness* story invites us to consider the impact of images that did not become iconic but rather circulated in such unassuming venues as university lecture halls, public libraries, and church basements.

Viewing the Arctic Refuge struggle from this perspective—from the ground up—reveals how citizens engaged with environmentalism in their communities. The slide show made the refuge real, made this distant place come alive for viewing audiences. While few spectators would ever visit the Arctic, many of them became convinced that this was a special place that should not be despoiled. Lenny focused on winning people over at the local level, one community at a time. Rather than directing his efforts toward the national media, he built the *Last Great Wilderness* campaign from the bottom up. He concentrated on the patient, persistent work of talking with citizens, trying to persuade them of their duty to join a collective effort to protect the refuge. The point was not simply to raise awareness but to filter their concern into concrete political action. He gave audiences immediate steps they could take—writing to elected officials, submitting a letter to their local newspaper, forming a local Arctic Refuge issue committee—to participate in democracy.

Even as they brought the Arctic to the grassroots, Lenny and other activists emphasized the transnational significance of the refuge. They used visual images to demonstrate how this place, often described as one of the nation's most remote landscapes, is intricately connected to human and nonhuman communities beyond the borders of Alaska. The Porcupine caribou herd, currently numbering more than 200,000 animals, takes the longest land migration of any animal on earth, journeying from their wintering grounds in Canada to have their young on the Arctic coastal plain. Snow geese, tundra swans, sandhill cranes, red-throated loons—approximately 200 bird species in all—travel from all across the United States and from six continents to the refuge. The movements of birds and mammals across borders, the epic journeys and long-distance flights, reveal the connectedness of the Arctic. By helping audiences see these connections, grassroots visual culture fostered transnational awareness.

Lenny spent considerable time in Gwich'in villages across Canada and Alaska and learned how their communities are intimately connected to the caribou that run through their lands. Since the caribou have their calving grounds on the refuge's coastal plain—the same place drilling proponents want to develop—the Arctic Refuge debate represents an existential threat to Gwich'in culture. To convey this message to non-Indigenous audiences, the *Last Great Wilderness* project featured the voices of the Gwich'in—recorded in interviews that appeared in the show itself and, whenever possible, in the form of public testimony by representatives on tour. Their voices delivered

a devastating truth: drilling signified yet another example of the ongoing colonialist effort to enact cultural genocide on Indigenous peoples.

Just as environmental activists came to see the slide show as critical to the Arctic campaign, so too did Indigenous leaders. Across northwestern Canada and northeastern Alaska, First Nations governments and other organizations—including the Gwich'in Steering Committee and the Porcupine Caribou Management Board—worked closely with Lenny to ensure Indigenous participation. The tours played an important role in building unlikely alliances between environmentalists and Indigenous peoples and in fostering political support and solidarity across cultures. By bringing Indigenous voices to the forefront of the campaign, the *Last Great Wilderness* project helped transform the Arctic Refuge issue into a transnational struggle for environmental justice.

Environmental justice can be understood as a struggle against inequality—especially against the dangerous burdens of toxics, pollution, and other hazards that disproportionately harm communities of color. In fighting against fossil fuel development, Arctic Indigenous peoples resist structural violence and racism but also infuse environmental justice with different meanings. They emphasize the long history of settler colonialism that has stolen Indigenous lands and robbed Indigenous peoples of their food security. The Arctic coastal plain, they argue, is critical for migratory wildlife and for human communities in places now called Alaska, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories. Their food security, health, and well-being are all at stake, but so is something else. They are fighting to sustain bonds of reciprocity, stretching back over thousands of years, with caribou and other nonhuman life forms. They are trying to continue, in the words of Indigenous scholar Kyle Powys Whyte, “to experience the world as a place infused with responsibilities to humans, nonhumans and ecosystems.” When Gwich'in representatives toured with Lenny, they framed the refuge struggle in these terms. They encouraged audiences to see the “last great wilderness” as part of their ecological homeland.

In this campaign, refuge defenders brought together two seemingly antithetical ideas—the Arctic as wilderness, and the Arctic as Indigenous homeland. The unusual melding of these ideas emerged from unlikely relationships and alliances—and broke from a long colonial history of Indigenous exclusion and erasure. The Arctic Refuge struggle became a fight for environmental justice because Indigenous peoples pressed to have their voices and concerns heard and because certain outsiders, like Lenny, were willing to listen and learn.

The more I researched Lenny's activism, the more I realized that this seemingly small, quiet story can help us rethink larger narratives of environmentalism and democratic action. Critics have argued that wilderness advocates have focused too much on saving wild places, promoting a fantasy of pure, untouched nature that distracts from climate change and other systemic environmental problems. Other commentators have noted that mainstream environmental groups became increasingly professionalized during the late twentieth century, ensconced in DC, imbibing an inside-the-Beltway mentality that separated them from grassroots movements and local constituencies. Finally, some have characterized this period as marking the triumph of green consumerism, in which individual actions trumped collective solutions and Americans were encouraged to shop their way to ecological salvation. Lenny's story offers an entirely different perspective on this period.

On a hard drive in Whitehorse, Yukon, I found an obscure document—minutes from an Arctic Refuge strategy session—that summed up the political vision underlying Lenny's project and, I began to understand, the broader refuge struggle. At this 2000 meeting held in Washington, DC, Indigenous leaders and environmentalists from the United States and Canada, Lenny Kohm among them, described their approach as “the ‘trickle up’ theory” of politics. According to this theory, they

sought to bring local, grassroots attention to the Arctic Refuge in communities across the United States. In turn, they believed, local media coverage and citizen concern would trickle up to national media outlets and policy makers in DC. Even as they sought to influence federal policy, refuge defenders believed that the true source of power resided outside the Beltway. The people, they believed, could protect the refuge.

It's easy to overlook the trickle-up strategy. Doing so, though, impoverishes our understanding of this history and ignores how diverse alliances across the continent have fought to protect the refuge. Too often, journalists covering national politics fixate on the drama of DC: on the deal making between politicians, on the lobbying of special interest groups, on the relationship between Congress and the White House. In such coverage, what happens beyond the Beltway recedes from view. Environmentalism appears as just another professionally run advocacy campaign, courting influence to sway elected officials. Likewise, historical accounts of the environmental movement often fall into well-worn grooves, presenting the cause either as a locally based, volunteer led, grassroots protest effort or as a nationally based, professionally led, mainstream lobbying and litigation effort. In such narratives, grassroots and radical organizations are seen as offering an alternative to the mainstream, reenergizing the movement by adopting direct action strategies and refusing to compromise. Lenny's activism transcended these dichotomies. As he took the slide show from town to town, he built bridges between environmentalists and Indigenous peoples, between the grassroots and Capitol Hill, between local, national, and transnational scales of action.

It took a while, but I began to realize that the trickle-up approach runs throughout the entire history of protecting Arctic Alaska. Indeed, the theory was put into practice by the larger cast of characters populating these pages. It was demonstrated by Pamela A. Miller, a US Fish and Wildlife Service biologist in Alaska who leaked a suppressed report during the Reagan administration; by Scott Fisher, a Fairbanks-based Episcopal priest who worked with Gwich'in leaders to enlist religious support for refuge protection; by Glenna Frost, a Gwich'in woman from Old Crow, Yukon, who in 1991 spent six weeks on the road with Lenny just before a key Senate vote; by Brian O'Donnell, the director of a scrappy new environmental group who in 1995 helped mobilize grassroots pressure to convince President Bill Clinton to veto drilling from a budget bill; by Tom Bik and Laurel Toussaint, Sierra Club volunteers in Carbondale, Illinois, who hosted Lenny and Gwich'in spokespeople whenever the *Last Great Wilderness* tour came through their area; by Lorraine Netro and Kenny Smith, Gwich'in representatives from Canada, who were on Capitol Hill on 9/11 when planes struck the World Trade Center; and by Subhankar Banerjee, an Indian-born photographer whose Arctic Refuge images triggered an unexpected controversy when they were exhibited by the Smithsonian during the George W. Bush presidency. These and other unheralded stories provide a grassroots perspective on one of the most significant environmental debates in modern North America.

"Democracy," the eminent African American historian John Hope Franklin once observed, "is essentially an act of faith." Every time Lenny went on tour, every time he set up the slide projectors, every time he informed audience members of the current political situation, it was an act of faith, a testament to his steadfast belief that ordinary people could defend the Arctic Refuge and Indigenous rights. The legions of other people who made this history—scientists and college students, photographers and religious leaders, hunters and wilderness enthusiasts, local environmental activists and Indigenous representatives—expressed a similar faith. Despite the powerful forces arrayed against them, despite the deep-pocketed development crusade waged by the fossil fuel industry, the state of Alaska, and pro-drilling politicians, they tried to reinvigorate democracy—one scientific study, one leaked report, one Sunday sermon, one constituent letter, one slide show at a time.

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Since attending Lenny's memorial, I have interviewed many people who have stated, without any doubt or hesitation, that his slide show protected the Arctic Refuge. Joe Tetlichi, a Gwich'in representative from Canada who joined Lenny on two *Last Great Wilderness* tours, said to me, "If it wasn't for him, there would be oil development on the Arctic Refuge right now."

"You think so?" I asked.

"Oh yeah," he immediately responded. "I don't think so. I know so. Look at the near close calls we had. Imagine if Lenny never went up for the job? What could have happened?"

Brian O'Donnell, who served as the executive director of the DC-based Alaska Wilderness League for several years, said that Lenny's project "kept the Arctic Refuge from being destroyed—absolutely."

It would be easy to dismiss these comments as naive statements regarding the power of images—and one individual—to influence environmental policy. Yet I do not think they are claiming that his slide show had a simple, direct, or immediate effect on politics. Beyond the sheer number of constituent letters and phone calls generated by the tours, beyond the particular elected officials whose positions shifted due to citizen pressure, Lenny's project created a set of relationships reaching from Capitol Hill to north of the Arctic Circle to cities and towns across the lower forty-eight. It is these relationships that allowed the slide show to have agency in the world. As Brian mused, "How did the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge go from being just a wildlife refuge to being an iconic place that was the biggest environmental fight in the US for decades? It's never that one meeting in a garden club in Toledo, Ohio, but maybe it's the thousand meetings in the thousand Toledos around the country. And you can never know which one did it or how this all happened, but I can tell you that it wouldn't have happened without Lenny." Brian noted how the slide show tours had short-term effects—blasts of grassroots enthusiasm in the form of letters and phone calls before pivotal votes—but also long-term reverberations: building a larger base of support, people who remained involved in the cause for years to come. And, as Joe and others emphasized, Lenny played a crucial role in forming relationships—in building trust and alliances—between Gwich'in communities and environmental organizations. Joe's use of counterfactual scenarios—"Imagine if Lenny never went up for the job? What could have happened?"—suggests that at various moments, different outcomes could have occurred.

I first met Joe in the summer of 2016, the eighth year of Barack Obama's presidency. The Arctic Refuge had been in political dormancy for a decade, as the last major legislative standoff had occurred during the George W. Bush administration. A few months after we talked, Donald Trump was elected president. Spewing climate-change denial and embracing pro-corporate initiatives, his administration immediately launched an all-out assault on environmental regulation and pushed for reckless expansion of fossil fuel development. It took little time for Republican leaders to sneak an Arctic drilling provision into the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, which was passed by Congress and signed by Trump on December 22, 2017. In the long history of the Arctic Refuge debate, this was the first time both Congress and the president had approved a drilling plan. As I write, the Trump administration is moving aggressively to open the coastal plain—which scientists consider the "biological heart" of the refuge and Gwich'in call "The Sacred Place Where Life Begins"—to fossil fuel extraction. Meanwhile, environmental and Indigenous activists are fighting to keep oil drills out of the Arctic.

With the refuge under greater threat than ever before, this history has a new urgency and relevance for our own time. The stories I tell in this book do not offer a blueprint, an exact model to follow today—it's hard to imagine someone loading up a car with slide projectors—but they

demonstrate how visual images along with testimony from people in frontline communities can help mobilize and organize at the grassroots. They show how respectful relationships and alliances can be built between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. They reveal how this supposedly remote place is connected ecologically to places across the continent and around the world. In a time of escalating climate change, species extinction, and threats to Indigenous lands and cultures, they indicate the urgency of struggling, before it is too late, before the drilling starts, to defend the Arctic Refuge.

Viewed from a distance, we might consider this history as inevitable, fated to happen in the way that it did. Viewed from the trenches, though, this is a history of contingency, a story of things that could have turned out differently. It is a history forged not only in the hard marble hallways of Capitol Hill or recorded in the pages of the *New York Times* but a history made by a rambling activist, Gwich'in spokespeople, and local organizers, a history enacted in lecture halls, church basements, and public libraries.

This is a story of the grassroots taking on Goliath, of a slide show galvanizing the citizenry, of unlikely cross-cultural alliances forming across vast distances. It is a history written during an urgent time, infused with hope that things might still turn out differently.