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Notes from the Icehouse



Representations, traces, vital agents: why images matter to environmental history

Finis Dunaway

The young environmentalist was gobsmacked. The photograph just didn't make any sense. Finally, he pressed the photographer for an explanation. 'How', he asked, 'could there be a hunting camp in a pristine wilderness?'¹

Only a few months before, in August 2002, the Indian-born photographer Subhankar Banerjee had traveled with Charlie Swaney, Mike Garnette and Jimi John on a boat up the East Fork of the Chandalar River. They set off from the Gwich'in community of Arctic Village, Alaska, where his three hosts lived, and journeyed to Swaney's hunting camp, located *inside* the boundary of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Banerjee's photograph, which so troubled the environmental activist, shows Swaney outfitted in camouflage

¹ Subhankar Banerjee, 'From Kolkata to Kaktovik en route to Arctic voices: Something like an introduction', in Banerjee (ed.), *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), p. 9.

Figure 1. Charlie Swaney's hunting camp along the East Fork of the Chandalar River, inside the boundary of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, not far from Swaney's home community of Arctic Village, Alaska, 2002. Swaney stands on a wooden observation tower, scanning for animals. Courtesy of Subhankar Banerjee.



and standing on a wooden observation tower (Figure 1). He peers through binoculars, scanning for animals. In the distance loom the snow-capped Romanzof Mountains, while below willows gleam in yellow and gold. At the base of the tower stands another wooden structure used for smoking and drying meat and fish.²

I was also surprised by this image, and others Banerjee made on that hunting trip, when I first saw them in August 2005. I was in Seattle, doing some research at the University of Washington. Taking a break from the library, I strolled across campus to the Burke Muse-

² Subhankar Banerjee, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land* (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2003), p. 147.

um of Natural History and Culture to see his exhibit, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land*. I entered the museum with some reluctance, as I assumed that any show about the Arctic Refuge – one of the most contested lands in all of North America – would conform to dominant wilderness aesthetics. Surely, I thought, Banerjee would present the refuge as pure, untouched nature, a place apart from human society.³

Walking through the museum gallery, I had to resist the urge to slot the show into the familiar grooves of US conservation photography. It would have been easy to do so. I noticed visual echoes of Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter in Banerjee's work and found a smattering of historic and contemporary quotes sprinkled through the captions heralding the Arctic for 'its absolutely untouched character', for being a 'true wilderness' in which people 'are visitors'. These statements seemed ripe for ideological critique, for unmasking the facile and flawed ideas of wilderness that have shaped modern environmentalism.⁴

Yet the more I contemplated the exhibit, the more I realised how much it departed from the wilderness ideal – not least in its portrayal of Gwich'in and Iñupiat cultural and subsistence practices. In one photograph, Banerjee depicted an Iñupiat cemetery with a pair of bowhead jawbones rising out of the snow. The jawbones seem to converge, forming an arc at the edge of the grave areas. Banerjee's

³ For two influential critiques of the wilderness ideal, see Ramachandra Guha, 'Radical American environmentalism and wilderness preservation: A Third World critique', *Environmental Ethics* 11 (Spring 1989): 71–83; and William Cronon, 'The trouble with wilderness; or, getting back to the wrong nature', in Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), pp. 69–90.

⁴ Gail Hull, curator of the exhibition at the California Academy of Sciences, provided a copy of the captions. The exhibit opened there in September 2003 after a major controversy over its display at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in the spring of 2003; it later toured other venues, including the Burke Museum in Seattle. For a discussion of this controversy, see Finis Dunaway, 'Reframing the last frontier: Subhankar Banerjee and the visual politics of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge', *American Quarterly* 58 (March 2006): 159–80.

caption described the jawbones as ‘a sign of reverence’, a spiritual marker demonstrating ‘the relationship the Iñupiat have with the whale’. The show also featured a stunning suite of images from his hunting trip with Swaney, Garnette and John, showing the three men cutting ‘golden willow branches to use as a carpet on which to lay the moose’ they had killed, carefully butchering the carcass and then transporting the stacks of red meat, vividly rendered in colour photographs, back to the village.⁵

I was so fascinated by the photographs that I ended up visiting the exhibit twice more before leaving Seattle, and later wrote a review essay about it.⁶ At the time, Banerjee’s framing of the Arctic struck me as exceptional, a challenge to mainstream conservation imagery. Only much later did I learn that the visual history of the Arctic Refuge was far more varied and complex than I had assumed. And it turns out that the question the activist posed to Banerjee would be key to unlocking this story – and to offering new portals into why images matter to environmental history.

When I first wrote about Banerjee’s exhibit, I treated the images primarily as *representations*. To understand what made his photographs distinctive, I researched media coverage of the Arctic Refuge debate, then at a fever pitch: US President George W. Bush and other proponents of oil drilling were aggressively pushing to turn the refuge’s coastal plain into a new hub for fossil fuel development. The debate seemed to follow a familiar dualism, although both sides framed Arctic Alaska as the nation’s last frontier. For Bush and drilling proponents, it was a frontier of extraction. They made their case for its exploitation through their swaggering dismissal of climate science and reckless denial of the hazardous impacts drilling might have on wildlife species and Indigenous communities. But conservationists upheld frontier myths, too. When I entered the Burke

⁵ Banerjee, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*, pp. 153 and 147.

⁶ Dunaway, ‘Reframing the last frontier.’

Museum exhibit, I noticed there was a stack of pamphlets about the Arctic Refuge produced by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the government agency responsible for managing this area. The pamphlet was riddled with colonial fantasies of nature. It celebrated 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.’ Likewise, when the Sierra Club announced a guided trip through the Arctic Refuge in 2005, the trip leader unabashedly reveled in colonialist rhetoric of discovery. ‘You can imagine yourself being dropped in a time machine’, he claimed, ‘and going back a few centuries to when Europeans were just starting to explore the North American continent.’⁷

Banerjee rejected these popular framings of Arctic Alaska. Rather than reinforcing colonial visions and erasing Indigenous presence, his photographs portrayed the Arctic as Indigenous homeland. The picture of Charlie Swaney at his hunting camp offers one such example – a representation that infuses the Arctic Refuge debate with meanings that transcend the wilderness versus oil binary.

By presenting Banerjee as a lone voice, an artist who broke from the mainstream, though, I was also overlooking the vibrant history that made his photographs possible. A decade after first seeing his pictures displayed on a museum wall, I embarked on a larger research project about the history of the Arctic Refuge struggle.⁸ I began to see Banerjee’s Arctic photographs not just as representations, but as texts containing multiple *traces* of this history.

Consider the question posed by the baffled environmentalist: why did Swaney have a hunting camp inside the Arctic Refuge? Given the long colonial tradition of fortress conservation – a model in

⁷ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, ‘Arctic National Wildlife Refuge’ (Oct. 2002), n.p.; Dashka Slater, ‘Where the Wild Things Are’, *Sierra* (March/April 2005), p. 33.

⁸ This research led to Finis Dunaway, *Defending the Arctic Refuge: A Photographer, an Indigenous Nation, and a Fight for Environmental Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021). Some material in this essay is excerpted from the book.

which Indigenous peoples were violently cast out of lands they had customarily used and stewarded – Swaney’s presence here points to a different approach to conservation in which subsistence rights are maintained. The observation tower and other structures built on this land are material traces that attest to a history of Indigenous leadership and advocacy, including forging unlikely alliances with environmentalists and other groups. That leadership, I learned, spanned the US–Canada borderlands and helped transform the Arctic Refuge debate from a traditional wilderness battle into something else entirely: a transnational struggle for Indigenous rights and environmental justice. Made in one tiny patch of the Arctic Refuge, Banerjee’s photograph opens larger vistas into cross-border environmental history and reveals, in a tangible, material way, how Indigenous agency changed conservation policy.⁹

Yet there were many more threads and layers to this story, and they recast my understanding of Arctic images. My research unexpectedly took a micro-historical turn, as I began to track down clues about a traveling slide show put together by a group of amateur activists in the 1980s, long before Banerjee ever ventured to the Arctic. Many environmental and Indigenous advocates told me that this little slide show had played an absolutely crucial role in the fight to keep oil drills out of the Arctic Refuge. Sceptical at first, I found more and more evidence to demonstrate the show’s surprising impact – and to illuminate how images act as *vital agents* in history.

The show was called *The Last Great Wilderness* but – despite its title – transcended conventional dualisms to connect the Arctic to Indigenous culture and struggles for justice (Figure 2). Like Banerjee’s photographs, the slide show refused to isolate the Arctic Refuge, to present it as a remote, sequestered place, completely detached from human society and systemic environmental problems. One of the activists involved in the project, a photographer named Lenny

⁹ For a discussion of this photograph in relation to the long history of fortress conservation, see Subhankar Banerjee and Finis Dunaway, ‘Beyond fortress conservation: Postcards of biodiversity and justice’, *Environmental History* 28 (Jan. 2023): 180–207.

Kohm, was invited by Gwich'in leaders to spend several months in their communities dotted across northeastern Alaska and northwestern Canada. He was there to learn about their culture and lives on the land – and to make slides for the *Last Great Wilderness* show. In the spring of 1988, Norma Kassi, a citizen of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, and her family hosted Kohm at their hunting camp in Crow Flats, Yukon. 'He wanted to connect with the Indigenous peoples and grasp our stories', Kassi explained to me. 'He went right directly to our camps, and lived with us on the land and ate caribou with us and helped us make dry meat. He wanted to feel that. He embraced our Indigenous knowledge as much as he could.' From the Gwich'in, Kohm learned that the Arctic Refuge debate was not simply a question of wilderness versus oil. Fossil fuel development would threaten the caribou that run through their lands – caribou with whom the Gwich'in had maintained relations of responsibility with since time immemorial. Oil drilling, they told him, would lead to cultural genocide.¹⁰

Before Kohm and his small grassroots group developed the *Last Great Wilderness* show, national environmental organisations rarely discussed the human rights issues at stake, nor did they partner with the Gwich'in in their Arctic Refuge campaigns. The slide show not only challenged dominant representations of wilderness and contained multiple traces of cross-border history; it also became a vital agent that helped build a larger social movement to protect this land. For the next two decades, from 1988 to 2008, Lenny Kohm

¹⁰ Norma Kassi, interview with author, 9 April 2020. On Gwich'in and the caribou, see Faith Gemmill, 'Caribou story', in Hank Lentfer and Carolyn Servid (eds), *Arctic Refuge: A Circle of Testimony* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2001), pp. 48–51. The Gwich'in fight to protect the caribou relates to other Indigenous struggles for environmental justice based on relations of responsibility. See Kyle Powys Whyte, 'Indigenous experience, environmental justice and settler colonialism', in Brian E. Bannon (ed.), *Nature and Experience: Phenomenology and the Environment* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), pp. 157–73. A digitised version of *The Last Great Wilderness* show is available on the *Defending the Arctic Refuge* public history website. See defendingthearticrefuge.com/slideshow/.

Figure 2. Title slide for *The Last Great Wilderness* slide show. The caribou photograph was likely taken by Lenny Kohm in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in 1987 or 1988. This title slide represents a composite of two slides – one featuring the caribou photograph, the other with the title lettering – that were programmed via a fade-dissolve unit to merge onscreen for several seconds.



and other activists took the show on the road, presenting in university lecture halls, public libraries and church basements. On these tours, Kohm was often joined by representatives of the Gwich'in Nation, who explained to grassroots audiences how the oil drilling debate was also a struggle for their food security and cultural survival. The Gwich'in reframed the narrative of the Arctic Refuge and changed audience perceptions of this raging political battle. The slide show tours helped build trust between environmentalists and the Gwich'in Nation, and mobilised diverse groups to lend their support to refuge protection.

By piecing together the story of this slide show, I was also moving beyond iconic images – the focus of much of my previous research –

into what I began calling grassroots visual culture. It is common to assume that images exert 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 crystallise a cultural moment, shape public consciousness, even alter the course of history. In contrast, the *Last Great Wilderness* story reveals the impact of images that did not become iconic, but rather were shared in humble, unassuming venues far from the national media spotlight. Kohm’s project created a set of relationships linking the hard marble hallways of Capitol Hill to Indigenous communities north of the Arctic Circle through cities and towns across the United States. These relationships and unlikely alliances gave the slide show powerful agency in the world.¹¹

When I saw Banerjee’s photographs in the Burke Museum in 2005, I had no idea that, for the past two years, he had also been do-

¹¹ On the power of iconic images, see Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). For a history of environmental icons, see Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). On the significance of non-iconic images, see Gregg Mitman and Kelley Wilder (eds), *Documenting the World: Film, Photography, and the Scientific Record* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Other studies that consider social movements and grassroots visual culture include Leigh Raiford, ‘“Come let us build a new world together”: SNCC and photography of the Civil Rights Movement’, *American Quarterly* **59** (Dec. 2007): 1129–57; Gregg Mitman, ‘Afterword: The New Green Wave’, in *Reel Nature: America’s Romance with Wildlife on Film*, paperback edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 209–20; Robert M. Wilson, ‘Faces of the climate movement’, *Environmental History* **22** (Jan. 2017): 128–39; Shirley Roburn, ‘Beyond film impact assessment: *Being Caribou* community screenings as activist training grounds’, *International Journal of Communication* **11** (2017): 2520–39; and Shirley Roburn, ‘Learning from caribou people: Gwich’in and Inuvialuit perspectives on the *Being Caribou* Project’, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* **26** (Summer 2019): 518–39.

ing slide show tours. Teaming up with Gwich'in and Iñupiat spokespeople, he became convinced that grassroots visual culture could make all the difference in the refuge struggle. 'I deeply believed', he told me a decade later, 'that if you educate the public, it could have real impact.' Banerjee was not a lone artist, but rather located himself within a long, oft-overlooked tradition of visual activism. He quickly added, 'It's exactly what Lenny Kohm did for years and years and years. It's still the same story.'¹²

One way to tell this story is to credit outsiders like Kohm and Banerjee for providing Indigenous representatives with opportunities they did not have before, granting them new platforms to voice their concerns. Yet the photograph of Charlie Swaney signals a different story. Both Kohm and Banerjee had life-changing experiences while visiting Arctic Indigenous communities. Their paths to activism and grassroots visual culture surfaced from these epiphanies, from listening to and learning from Indigenous caretakers of Arctic lands and waters. Many of the places they visited had been protected from fossil fuel development because of a long history of Indigenous advocacy on both sides of the US–Canada border. The pictures they made and the forms of political action they pursued were not theirs alone, but were directly shaped by Indigenous agency.

Too often, historians treat images either as inert illustrations that offer nothing more than objective records of reality or as passive mirrors that merely reflect the past. By approaching them as representations, traces and vital agents, historians can instead use them as primary sources to consider how images played an active role in the making of the environmental past. Grassroots visual culture can also offer new vistas into the history of social movements and unlikely alliances, complicating dominant narratives about mainstream environmental ideas and representations. The point is not to make images the centre of the story, but rather to approach them with openness and curiosity, probe their production and reception histories, and be willing to let them bid you into unexpected terrains.

¹² Subhankar Banerjee, interview with author, 3 and 4 July 2015.

Finis Dunaway is professor of history at Trent University. He is the author, most recently, of *Defending the Arctic Refuge: A Photographer, an Indigenous Nation, and a Fight for Environmental Justice* (2021), which received the Hal K. Rothman Book Prize for best western environmental history from the Western History Association, as well as awards from the Western Writers of America and the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada. He has developed a public history website companion to the book: <https://defendingthearcticrefuge.com>.

Email: finisdunaway@trentu.ca