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COMMENTARY ANDREW BLACK AND JOAN BROWN

Why New Mexicans must care about the Arctic

By Andrew Black and Joan Brown

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On June 19, we will travel to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, one of the last truly wild places on Earth. We go not as politicians or scientists, but as a delegation of faith leaders from across the United States. As a Presbyterian minister and a Catholic Franciscan sister, we believe caring for creation is not optional — it is a holy responsibility from God.

Some New Mexicans may wonder why they should care about a remote landscape nearly 3,500 miles away. The answer is simple: We are all interconnected to and with the Arctic. The Earth is an amazing web of life, and what happens in one place affects communities far beyond its borders.

The climate that shapes New Mexico's forests, rivers, farms and deserts is linked to the health of the Arctic. The choices we make there are choices about the future we leave to our children and grandchildren.

As climate change intensifies drought, wildfires, and extreme weather across the Southwest, the Trump administration is now leasing millions of acres in the Arctic for oil and gas development.

What many people do not realize is that Arctic permafrost — ground that has remained frozen for thousands of years — stores vast amounts of carbon and methane, two of the greenhouse gases most responsible for climate change. New roads, drilling, and industrial development can accelerate the thawing of permafrost, releasing these gases into the atmosphere and worsening climate impacts felt here in New Mexico and around the world.

The Arctic refuge may seem distant, but its future is tied to ours.



For people of faith, creation is not merely a collection of resources to be extracted. Scripture teaches that the Earth belongs to God (Psalm 24) and that human beings are called to serve as responsible caretakers, not conquerors. God is the landlord, and we are merely tenants of this sacred home. Saint Francis of Assisi, the namesake of our city, spoke of Brother Sun, Sister Moon and Mother Earth, recognizing that all creation is one interconnected family.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge embodies this sacred vision. Spanning millions of acres of mountains, tundra, rivers and coastline, it provides habitat for caribou, polar bears, musk oxen, migratory birds and countless other species. These creatures are not obstacles to development; they are sacred members of creation, each bearing intrinsic value.

The Arctic is also home to the lifeways and spiritual traditions of the Gwich'in people, whose relationship with the Porcupine caribou herd stretches back to time immemorial. The Gwich'in call the refuge's coastal plain "the sacred place where life begins."

The caribou are not simply a food source; they are woven into the community's culture, identity, spirituality and way of life. To threaten the herd with development is to threaten a people whose lives are deeply connected to the land.

Throughout Scripture, God calls us to love our neighbors and protect the vulnerable. Loving our neighbors means listening to Indigenous communities when they speak about places that sustain them. Justice for the environment and justice for people are inseparable.

When ecosystems are degraded, communities suffer. As Jesus teaches in the parable of the Good Samaritan, our neighbors are not just those closest to us but also those who may be distant from us in geography and culture (Luke 10:25-37).

New Mexicans understand the deep connection between land, water, wildlife and culture. We know that mountains, rivers, mesas and deserts are more than scenery — they shape our very identity and hold our stories. We also know that Indigenous peoples have stewarded these lands for generations.

Just as we seek to protect sacred places in New Mexico like Chaco Canyon and the Caja del Rio, we should stand with Indigenous communities working to protect sacred places in the Arctic.

Our journey to the Arctic is ultimately a sacred pilgrimage. We go to witness, to learn, and to pray in this sacred place. We go to stand alongside the Gwich'in who are working to protect a place of extraordinary beauty and significance. We go because faith calls us to see the deep interconnection

between people, land, water, wildlife and future generations.

The question before us is not simply what kind of Arctic we will leave behind. It is what kind of world we will choose to build together for ourselves and future generations.

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