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From Alaska, Great Concern for Central Park

By **ANDY NEWMAN**

Alaska: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, via Reuters; Central Park: Chang W. Lee/The New York Times
Know your native species: the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska (left) and Central Park in New York City (right).

Updated, 6:09 p.m. | In the interest of preserving an already-compromised sliver of urban wilderness, state legislators are asking the federal government to take over Central Park.

State legislators in Alaska, that is.

Annoyed with outsiders' meddling with the right to drill in the [Arctic National Wildlife Refuge](#), Representative [Kyle Johansen](#), Republican of Ketchikan, [introduced a resolution](#) in Juneau on Monday that gives the states-rights-depriving Eastern elites a taste of their own medicine.

It urges the feds to "declare Central Park to be a wilderness area and to prohibit any further improvement or development of Central Park unless authorized by an act of Congress."

Many of Mr. Johansen's colleagues immediately signed on as co-sponsors, including the speaker of the house.

[The resolution](#), first noted on this coast [by West Side Rag](#), is primarily a piece of political satire, Mr. Johansen said Wednesday, but one with a solid basis in history.

"What I'm trying to accomplish," he said, "is to basically make a point of the hypocrisy of — and don't take offense — those East Coast folks who write a lot of checks to shut down Alaska, while in their own backyard, Manhattan has been turned from a pristine wild island supporting an amazing [Muir web](#) of life to having only Central Park left as a green belt. And even Central Park has been radically changed."

The resolution notes that before Henry Hudson arrived in 1609, Manhattan was "a remarkably diverse and natural landscape of hills, valleys, forests, fields," marshes, beaches, ponds and streams that supported populations of gray wolf, elk, black bear and mountain lion.

Since then, the measure says, “the unrestrained development of buildings, highways and urban sprawl on Manhattan has destroyed habitat, displaced indigenous peoples and disrupted” ecosystems.

Central Park makes up 6 percent of Manhattan; the area that pro-drilling lawmakers seek to open to oil exploration makes up 8 percent of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Ergo, if one landscape is worthy of federal protection, why not the other?

Though extractive industries are not allowed to operate in Central Park (unless you count the overpriced organic hot-dog vendor near the skating rink), the landscape has indeed been repeatedly disfigured over the years by zoos and faux Gothic castles and whatnot.

But Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe said that “the premise that Central Park is not as protected as a federal property in Alaska is not true.” Among other things, the park falls under the Public Trust Doctrine, which bars use of parks for any non-recreation purpose without approval from the state legislature.

In New York, not Alaska.

As stranger-than-satire history would have it, though, the federal takeover of Central Park was actually proposed during the city’s 1970s fiscal crisis.

A 1978 study rejected the idea. While it would bring in needed money and personnel, the study’s authors wrote, federalization would put the park in the hands of federal civil servants “who would not feel compelled to be responsive to local wishes concerning usage.”