



# Episode 144: Fighting Back to Protect Alaska From The Onslaught of Attacks from Trump Administration

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[Rewilding Earth Podcast](#)

## Cooper Freeman, Center for Biological Diversity

**Jack:** [00:00:00] Cooper, welcome to the Rewilding Earth podcast.

**Cooper:** Thanks so much for having me, Jack. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Jack:** So Alaska, last time I got to talk about Alaska, Brad Mickeljohn was here and we had a different conversation than we normally have. Anytime we talk with Alaskans, because things are different there, and we're always talking about rewilding completely or partially denuded places of biodiversity in the lower 48 or other places in the world, and Alaska's different.

But we also have I just called it before we started recording a Brace for Impact kind of moment. I think that you guys are just like thinking about what's going to be happening for all

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your hard won victories in Alaska over the decades, and now wondering what sorts of threats are ahead with the current administration.

**Cooper:** Yeah. Thanks, Jack. And shout out to Brad Mickeljohn, who I've had the pleasure of working closely with up here, a good friend and an inspiration for the work that we do. You're exactly right. Alaska [00:01:00] has a big target on its back as it has really for decades and decades of decades.

But clearly the Trump administration is doubling down on wanting to tear up Alaska and put profits into the hands of corporate companies and destroy our wild lands and oceans. And it's really profound when you look at the singular executive order that Trump has put out that's a wishlist of all the development projects across Alaska.

That have industry interests from oil drilling in the Arctic to old growth logging in the Tongass to pipelines and offshore drilling mines. It's intense and it's real. It's a threat we take very seriously. On the other hand, there's a couple of things that make me optimistic about this fight.

The first is that we've been here [00:02:00] before. This is not the first rodeo for folks up in Alaska groups like mine, the Center for Biological Diversity who have been fighting off these attacks for a very long time. We know these places so well. We know that this is not the right direction for the state or our planet and we're prepared.

The other thing is that Trump. Can't just wave his magic wand and make these things happen. We have done a lot of work to build really strong records to protect these areas, whether Eisenbeck Refuge Refuge and Wilderness Area, the Arctic Refuge. Again, the Tongass National Forest and it's old growth.

So they're going to have their hands full and contending with us. And we're certainly going to bring the fight to them. But it's very clear that if Trump gets his way, Alaska is going to look very different for the worst. And we're looking forward and gearing up for one of the most monumental fights we've [00:03:00] had to protect this incredible place up here.

**Jack:** I can't tell you how many times I've thought about the center and been very thankful for its existence and its growing influence and power as an organization to be such an incredible threat to those who would do a state like Alaska harm. Really don't feel like there's an awful lot between us and that harm.

Except for the center sometimes, I think people are a little worried because there's real Rangers going home, losing their lifelong goal of a job. So many new young Rangers that were just starting out too, which is really sad. But we are seeing things happening with the stroke of a

pen, whether that's legal or not. Really doesn't matter on the ground, especially for this season, in all the national parks.

I'm heartened by the fact that you bring that up. They're not gonna get it without a fight.

**Cooper:** What's happening right now in the Trump administration is absolutely unprecedented and [00:04:00] devastating trump is taking a wrecking ball to the federal agencies that really provide essential life saving programs, conservation work, and scientific research. And it's going to have devastating consequences for both wildlife and people.

We're talking about biologists that help recover endangered species and National Weather Service employees that provide global weather data and park rangers, as you mentioned, that are going to provide amazing visitor experiences and keep our parks from being trashed and toilets clean. And beyond just conservation and wildlife, we're talking about the FAA and plane travel being safe and the Department of Education and

it's What they're doing to gut and kneecap our federal agencies and sabotage this incredibly important work to protect wild places and wildlife is just stunning, it's [00:05:00] shocking, it's horrendous the terrorization that federal employees are experiencing day to day and we often think these federal agencies, federal fish and wildlife agencies don't do enough, but we're there year after year arguing for more funding because already these these endangered species programs and recovery.

Projects and biologists and our national parks and Forest Service restoration planners are totally underfunded and that work is hanging in there by a thread and we need more of it to happen. And yet here we are completely unraveling and getting rid of so many vital, dedicated public servants and it goes beyond just the firings. Trump just revoked a Department of Justice legal opinion, ensuring that oil and mining companies are held responsible for killing birds and oil [00:06:00] spills in waste pits. The Department of Justice basically said they're no longer going to enforce the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. So private companies are free to massacre birds and Trump and Musk shuttered the Department of Justice's Office of Environmental Justice.

And that's not cost cutting or efficiency. That tiny office, the Office of Environmental Justice brought in tens of millions of dollars from illegal polluters. And without that, the taxpayers have to put the cleanup bill. And these are going to have direct impacts immediately on our air and water on endangered species and are going to threaten human health and wellbeing.

Americans want these vital government programs protected and we're pushing back in every way we can. We're filing lawsuits constantly to try to protect these programs and these workers as are many others. And it's really horrendous.

And the intel [00:07:00] we're receiving is that we expect it to continue to get worse and worse. So we are active. We're tracking it very closely. We're filing lawsuits and at the same time, we're certainly not taking our eyes off the long term fight we need to really be ready for these long administrative processes to protect places in Alaska the national parks, the refuges.

Fortunately up here our national monuments, our We're part of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, so they're protected by Congress would take a congressional action to undo them, although that's not out of the question. Unlike a lot of other places in Utah and California, where We're expecting there to be a ton of direct threats to unrolling reducing the footprint of national monuments.

But nonetheless, budgets are getting cut across the board. And it's really horrific. We're going to be doing everything we can to ensure Alaska and this country [00:08:00] stays wild and abundant for future generations.

**Jack:** That's what I was alluding to earlier with Alaska being an outlier, that it's wild, that it's wild now, that it needs to stay wild. We talk mostly about, how to bring things back from the brink, and Alaska in most ways still, I think, is not on the brink. What does rewilding or something else look like they're like, what are you trying to do? Other than just hold on for dear life sometimes when an administration like this comes in

**Cooper:** jack It's a really interesting question and one that i've thought a lot about and continue to think about i've worked on rewilding Projects down in places like california bringing beaver back working on supporting the return of wolves working on the return of grizzlies to the state.

So I've been in a place in places where I'm a student of the Tompkins Conservation work and spent time down there in Patagonia. So I, I have experience and understand the deep [00:09:00] need of places where species are missing or far too few. Habitat is disconnected and we need to bring back connectivity and we need to really protect the core areas, Keystone species the carnivores.

Alaska is different from that. Alaska's ecosystems by and large are still intact. There has been some really damaging development and that has hurt wildlife populations. But the scope and scale of Alaska is so vast that you don't see the level of fragmentation that you see in other places.

Alaska has lost species and has species that are not recovered from previous periods of overhunting. A couple examples, stellar sea cow in the Bering Sea, an extinct species lost very quickly during the whaling years and they grazed on seagrasses and would have been important contributors to healthy Bering Sea ecosystems.

[00:10:00] A similar species, the North Pacific right whales were hunted nearly to extinction and are still only numbering about 30 to 50, one of the most endangered whale populations in the world. And those numbers are not recovering like we'd like to see them. Species down in the Tongass, like Queen Charlotte goshawk and Prince of Whales flying squirrels, are struggling to recover after the decades of incredibly intense clear cut, Large scale old growth logging.

One thing that I think is really important is that yes, Alaska is this wild, intact, abundant place but it's struggling and species are struggling. There haven't been large runs of Chinook or chum salmon in the Yukon River or the Kuskokwim River. In years, those runs have completely collapsed.

That's astounding. Alaska's Chinook salmon populations are experiencing really intense declines. So what I really see [00:11:00] happening in Alaska right now is I think we're in a period a really scary period of de wilding. We're not yet to the point where we need necessarily to be rewild. And that's a really good thing.

aren't species that are completely wiped off the face of Alaska. But de wilding is a huge threat. We're in the early part of that narrative where we might need to be rewilded up here. But there's some problems with that. And what's driving a lot of these species declines is climate change.

You look at species like polar bears or ice seals, ice dependent species walrus. The ice is melting. Their suitable habitat is going away. Caribou, for example. Alaska has the most remarkable caribou herds on the planet with the largest, longest terrestrial migrations on earth. And they can't eat in the wintertime because we're experiencing warmer, wetter winters in the Arctic and the ground is freezing instead of snow and the caribou [00:12:00] can't poke their hooves through the ice and they're starving.

These rain on snow events. So what happens when you lose species like caribou? They're in decline across Alaska but we can't just bring populations back into habitats. that aren't suitable for them anymore. If polar bears ice is gone, what do we do in that case? So it's really a challenge. We can't just build highway overpasses to reconnect species when there aren't highways.

We're fighting those roads like the Ambler Road that would cut across the gates of the Arctic National Park and the Southern Brooks Range that would cut off the western Arctic Haribo herd migration and bisected. But nonetheless, as we talked about, Alaska is largely intact so we need to hold the line and stop Alaska from being de wilded by development projects, roads, mines, logging oil and gas drilling, and climate change is [00:13:00] the real elephant in the room, and if we don't stop that, it's really bleak for Alaska's wildlife from endemic Arctic plants, bugs and birds all the way up to big charismatic megafauna like polar bears and caribou.

We're in a precipitous place here and I think it's important that people understand that Alaska is in no ways just good if we leave it alone right now. We really need to work really hard to protect what we have up here.

**Jack:** Some of the things you just talked about are things that we commonly talk about in other areas where it's direct on the ground, developments, roads, logging.

But there's also an existential threat to Alaska that baffles me in terms of like, how do you deal with, you can't turn climate change off within the Alaska borders. The world is contributing to Alaska being choked off with this, there's a lot of things that are attacking Alaska from the outside,

**Cooper:** to some [00:14:00] degree, yes. I do want to make very clear that Alaska oil and gas production on the North Slope is a contributor to global climate change. And I will admit some frustration at to a large degree, the conservation community in Alaska and our state government and even the federal government that says, Oh there's nothing we can do in Alaska to stop climate change.

So we just need to try to do other stuff. And if you're the state of Alaska. What they'll say is we can't really address climate change for caribou what we can do is we can shoot bears and wolves out of helicopters and that'll help which of course, science does not support and is abhorrent or people say the Chinook salmon the ocean conditions are warming up, the rivers are warming up, not much we can do, meanwhile, there's tons of bycatch in the Bering Sea, Lucian Islands t Traw fishery for Pollock, the largest fishery in the United States, and the second largest in the world, a billion dollar behemoth.

That's supposed to be t trawling midwater [00:15:00] in the middle of the water column, but is actually on the bottom and destroying the Bering Sea, sea floor and catching chin salmon. So we need to be very careful to not to not use climate change to let all these other. things off the hook. We also need to make sure that we focus at least up here in Alaska for us Alaskans on.

We can do something about it. We need to work to phase out fossil fuel extraction in Alaska and keep it in the ground. And that matters for global climate change. With that said, you're absolutely right. This is a global issue. And even if we were to turn off the taps in Alaska completely, we're still looking really bad in terms of climate change up here.

And so it's scary with the Trump administration, their drill baby drill. Priority and what that could mean for the climate and biodiversity and extinction and clean air and clean water and it is, it's very challenging. So we need to step up [00:16:00] and keep working really hard to stop oil and gas development because it really is especially in places like Alaska, just driving species directly towards extinction.

**Jack:** And one other reason I like to talk to Alaskan conservationists is you bring a perspective that few others have and that's you just don't accept what other people are willing to accept. And I love that because I think a lot of people are curling up in the fetal position in different areas.

Just let's just weather this next four years. Let's just weather what and keep whatever we can. And you just now flat out rejected that and said, nah, we're not just going to hope for the best. There are a lot of things that you really can do, even in those areas that I laid out that seemed to me not very possible, not very fruitful, but you made it plain that you guys are on top of this stuff and I love that you have those reminders [00:17:00] for people.

**Cooper:** Thanks. And we are inspired by this landscape up here. We still do have so much left. The Arctic Ocean, for example, is by and large still undisturbed. Yes, there's icebreaker ships happening.

We've been fighting offshore oil and gas development. We the center had a huge win at the end of last year, where we finally got the leases essentially ended for the Liberty project, which was the only remaining offshore oil and gas development threat fully in federal waters in the Arctic Ocean. So these ecosystems inspire us every day.

We see what's at stake. You go up to the Arctic and you can feel the vastness, the intactness you stop on a beach and there's grizzly tracks everywhere and muskox and you find rare endemic Arctic plants and birds that are migrating from the Arctic. All over the world that some are up in Alaska and it's remarkable.

And so we know what's at stake and we not only see where [00:18:00] we need to go back to in so many of these other places, but we, I think we, we get, we have the privilege of really internalizing and feeling what a wilder world looks like and what's at stake here. And. And yeah, absolutely. We can't just sit on our hands and let it come to us and try to do the best we can.

We not only need to fight everything that's coming our way, but we need to stay on the offense and keep thinking creatively, strategically about how do we keep pushing the line and. If we get a positive, more friendly administration and in four years, which at least for me is what's helping me get up in the morning every day is thinking that we can turn this around.

And hopefully will maybe in two years, we'll we'll get a better Senator House. What do we want to push on? Where do we want to go from here? And we need to be prepared so that when that happens, we're not flat footed and starting to get ready that we're ready from day one to hit the ground [00:19:00] running because we realized that we may only have a few years the next time around to get things done and we need to be ready for that.

**Jack:** And the reminder that. We can all suffer from shifting baseline syndrome most of us were born when so much was already lost that there are very few people in the world relative to the world's population that can remember a place like Alaska.

that have ever been, have ever had that experience. I wish I could give a grizzly track on the side of a river experience to millions and millions of people. I think it would turn the world around. I really do. I really think that if people could have the experience, you and Brad and other conservationists and people who are able to visit places like Alaska to have that first hand contact.

It would change them and I think they would have the fire that you have in your belly instead of going well how bad is a cornfield or a sub development or another this or that?

**Cooper:** And I do again, want to [00:20:00] not let Alaska totally off the hook because I'm an environmental historian by training.

That's what I studied in my undergrad. And a lot of what we researched and looked into and focused on was shifting baseline syndrome. And that is real and alive in Alaska. Again, Alaska has been de wilded in a huge way. We, populations of wildlife. are greatly reduced. There used to be herds of caribou that were in the hundreds of thousands and now and there's they're in the tens of thousands where I live here on the Kenai Peninsula.

There used to be caribou herds. Period. And now they're gone, by and large. I've seen a caribou every now and then, but there used to be large herds. They were hunted out, moose have moved in the boreal forest, spruce bark beetle came through, things are warming, large wildfires, and we're actually seeing a transition from boreal forest to grasslands, which is an interesting rewilding. Exploration should be actually be bringing wood bison [00:21:00] into the Kenai Peninsula to help actually make a healthier ecosystem as it, we expect the transition to grasslands. That's a bit of a rabbit hole to go down, but an interesting rewilding conversation to be had bringing beaver back to support the peatlands.

But back to shifting baselines. We talked about Chinook numbers collapsing in the Yukon River. We are looking at and have seen rapid species decline in Alaska and the numbers are reduced. There's been a ton of fishing in Alaska that has reduced numbers of marine species in Alaska.

A lot of hunting that has reduced the number of terrestrial species. And even here in Alaska, there is a Big epidemic of shifting baseline syndrome. And I think that really harms us because while someone from a more suburban or urban place can come up here and be totally wild. Wow, there's so much open space.

There's so much wildlife that's still thriving. That's true. But up here, [00:22:00] I think we need to not accept what we have now and think that it's what we have in Alaska is good enough. Actually, what we're looking at is by and large, greatly reduced ecosystems, and that's why it's so important that we not let any project happen that's going to further reduce wildlife populations, further fragment landscapes up here.

Alaska's threatened and we do need to actually recover species up here. There's a lot of species that need recovery efforts. It's not just keep the status quo and that's something that we worked really hard at to tell those stories at the Center for Biological Diversity up here and to make sure that the people know that there's a lot of work to be done up here.

**Jack:** I wanted to go back to The administration the current politics the current mood I would imagine that the mood is really perked up if you're an oil and gas developer or anything like that everybody seems to be bellying up to the [00:23:00] trough in dc Which has ripple effects right out all the way to far flung places like Alaska and all over the world, really. Are there projects that are, I know there's some projects always ongoing, especially oil and gas. But are there some other things where you might have had a victory and thought you had put something to bed finally? Former victories that you're worried about as well as any new stuff, new promises that they're making to the extractive industries?

**Cooper:** Let me take that in two parts, Jack. The first one that I want to talk about is what you said, that there is a lot of industry excitement and bravado about, oh, we're Trump's going to open back up.

Alaska is open for business. And of course that's a certain kind of business. Recreation, restoration are huge businesses in Alaska, and that's what we want to see. Supported. Alaska, people say Alaska is locked up. And it's only locked up for [00:24:00] certain kinds of industries that are going to destroy the place.

And there's a lot of other economic activities and people that benefit from Alaska being wide open for more earth friendly. Activities. But take, for example, drilling in the Arctic Refuge, the economic fundamentals just aren't there. Trump under the Tax Act in 2017, they required to lease sales in the Arctic Refuge.

One was in 2020 21. And there was just one held in 2024. They were required by Congress and they have both completely flopped. The first one, there were three bids two by, they weren't even really oil companies. They were just land prospectors and those bids had been returned. And the only other bidder was the state of Alaska, which is not an oil company.

And basically did it to try to make it seem like there was some interest. The second lease sale in 20. 24 that just happened in December. There was not a single bid. And the [00:25:00] deal is,

it's just a bad investment. Not putting aside the ecological catastrophe of drilling in the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge, but from a pure business standpoint, it's just a really bad investment.

It's risky. No one really has an idea of how much oil there. It's expensive. An industry, quite frankly, Doesn't look at it. There's also been a ton of campaigning getting banks and insurers to stay out of the Arctic and we're trying to keep them on that side of things there and having a pretty good success.

Take for another example, the Alaska LNG pipeline. There's people have been trying to push that for 50 years and our governor and Trump are talking about it. It's going to happen. It's a multi billion dollar project with no investors, no financing, and no buyers of the gas. And there is nothing Trump can do to change those fundamentals. I think we do need to cut through the noise and make sure that we don't get so [00:26:00] sidetracked and swept up by these TV narratives that, Oh, if. Trump just opens things up. There's going to be a rush of of investors in these projects. And that doesn't mean again we're standing by and waiting to see what happens, but I think that should give us some optimism and we need to make sure that we keep on those messages.

And that we push back in those ways and keep these projects really untenable and uninteresting for industry. But there is so much that we've won and that we are really concerned about being rolled back. Just a couple of examples, the Ambler road project, that was a massive campaign that our organization and many others fought really hard for with the Biden administration and one, we got those permits.

Revoked that would have been a few hundred mile road that would have cut across again, as I mentioned, the Southern Brooks Range, Gates of the Arctic National Park, bisected the Western Arctic caribou herd migration route. We expect that Trump is going to turn that one around the [00:27:00] roadless rule in the Tongass protecting 9 million acres of old growth temperate rainforest.

We know that they're going to try to turn that around the Eisenback refuge and wilderness area now. This was one that unfortunately Biden bucked many decades of democratic precedent and is trying to move this road forward through the Eisenbeck Refuge, the largest eel grass beds in the world.

So critically important for so many migratory birds. So we're going to have to fight that. So yes, we are very concerned about things that are going to get rolled back, but they're going to have to go through administrative processes. And that's where we're going to get to take it to him. And we're ready for it.

**Jack:** I think this highlights the reason to have guys like you around who make a habit of cutting through the performative political theater. The BS that people just throw out there and what's [00:28:00] really on the ground and what among all that smoke is really a threat and then keeping an eye on that.

I would hope that the listeners today would check out Center for Biological Diversity one more time, send them some good vibes keep them supported. And keep thinking about people, this is the kind of stuff that you're supporting when you're working with people like Cooper and so many other people at the center.

**Cooper:** Yeah, and it's such a balance and I appreciate that we take every threat really seriously And I don't mean to make drilling in the refuge sound like it's not a real threat I mean it really is and to lose that really I think the country's last truly undeveloped Landscape.

There is not a trail there's no campgrounds. There's no cabins. There's nothing like that. It's 19 million acres. It's the size of U. S. States elsewhere.

Still intact. We still have this is Our heritage, our public interest heritage. And I was just at a Arctic defense campaign meeting last week [00:29:00] with many members of the Gwich'in steering committee who have been defending the Arctic refuge for decades really largely on half of the porcupine caribou herd, which is an international caribou herd goes across the border between.

Canada and the U. S. and they birth their calves every year on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge, which is where drilling is proposed for. And we can't lose that place. Polar bears den there. It's just all millions of migratory birds every year nest there in the summer. It's unthinkable to lose the Arctic Refuge to drilling.

And we're not standing by and dismissing the threat. But I appreciate what you said that we are trying to cut through the noise and be strategic. Make sure that The facts get presented. Make sure that we have compelling narratives that tell the real stories about these things and figure out where we need to put our energy and what messaging we need to use, where, so that [00:30:00] we can protect all these places because there's.

Not a lot of people up here. There's a lot of land, but there's not a lot of people. And I will say we're hiring up right now at the center. We're bringing on more attorneys. And that's in large part, thanks to our supporters that are helping us grow our ranks in this moment. There's.

A small crew of attorneys up here public interest attorneys that are going to be fighting to protect 100, plus million acres of public lands and wilderness areas. It's intense and it's a pretty profound battle, but we're up for it and we're motivated and Groups like the rewilding

institute and others that you know We get to work with and support us really help keep the wind in our sails

**Jack:** You know what?

My next question is going to be I think that after hearing all of this I know that people are fired up. They always are and they always want to know how to help. So rather than just put that in the extra credit notes let's deal with that. You talk a lot about lawyers and a lot of our listeners [00:31:00] are not lawyers.

What is the public and supposed to be doing? What would you like more of?

**Cooper:** Yeah, it's a great question. And the answer is always yes, of course. And one of the things that I'm seeing is really effective right now is if you live in a place particularly where Your Congress people your senators or your house representatives are Republican and showing support for what's happening in DC, go to those town hall meetings, call them up that, that's so important that they hear from you and they see the blowback. We can't give up on that. That's really important. So for listeners across the country, especially those in those places get involved and get activated. For us up here in Alaska we encourage you to sign up for the center's newsletters. There will still be doing action alerts.

We still need to show this administration that these actions are incredibly unpopular. across the country. That's really important. We need to tell our stories in a really compelling way. And when [00:32:00] you see things to share with your friends and family, keep people up to date, keep people engaged.

And we also need financial support to keep this going, it really takes people power. And I think a lot about the professionalization of the environmental movement. And again we can't just leave it up to the lawyers to save us. On the other hand a lot of these fights are going to end up being in court, and that's another conversation about how effective the courts are going to be, but certainly they are today, and we think they will continue to be, and that's where we're going to have to take a lot of this fight.

If you have the means and can support organizations like mine and others Please do because it's going to take a lot of people power to put these cases together. It takes an extraordinary amount of time and energy to to do this and we're up for it.

**Jack:** And we do need support.

Cooper, thank you so much for taking the time for doing this.

**Cooper:** Thanks, Jack. And thanks to the incredible work that you all do at the Rewilding Institute. I follow it [00:33:00] closely and I'm excited. There is still so much positive work being done across the country to bring back missing species, to reconnect fragmented habitats, and you all are part of that.

And I think we really need to keep doing that positive work, keep telling success stories, keep working where we can. At the local, regional, state level advancing these rewilding projects. And at the same time, thanks for your interest in protecting these places that were trying to stop being de wilded to need rewilding, if that's even possible in an era of climate change.

I know your listeners probably care a lot about Alaska. Many have been up here and have really fond memories. So we'd be happy to come back and keep folks updated and Yeah, keep you alert for what's happening in Alaska. There's certainly going to be a lot happening over the next few years.

**Jack:** And depending on where you're listening to this podcast right now all the extra credit and links and things that Cooper mentioned today, where you could lend a hand. We have a lot of resources on this episode of the rewilding earth [00:34:00] podcast. You can just go to [rewilding.org/slash/pod](http://rewilding.org/slash/pod) and you'll find this episode and many others, but in this one.

Check out at the very bottom the extra credit section where you'll be plied with all the tools we can possibly throw at you to choose from and how you'd like to help in this effort. And once again, thank you so much Cooper. Thanks Jack Thanks everybody. Have a good day