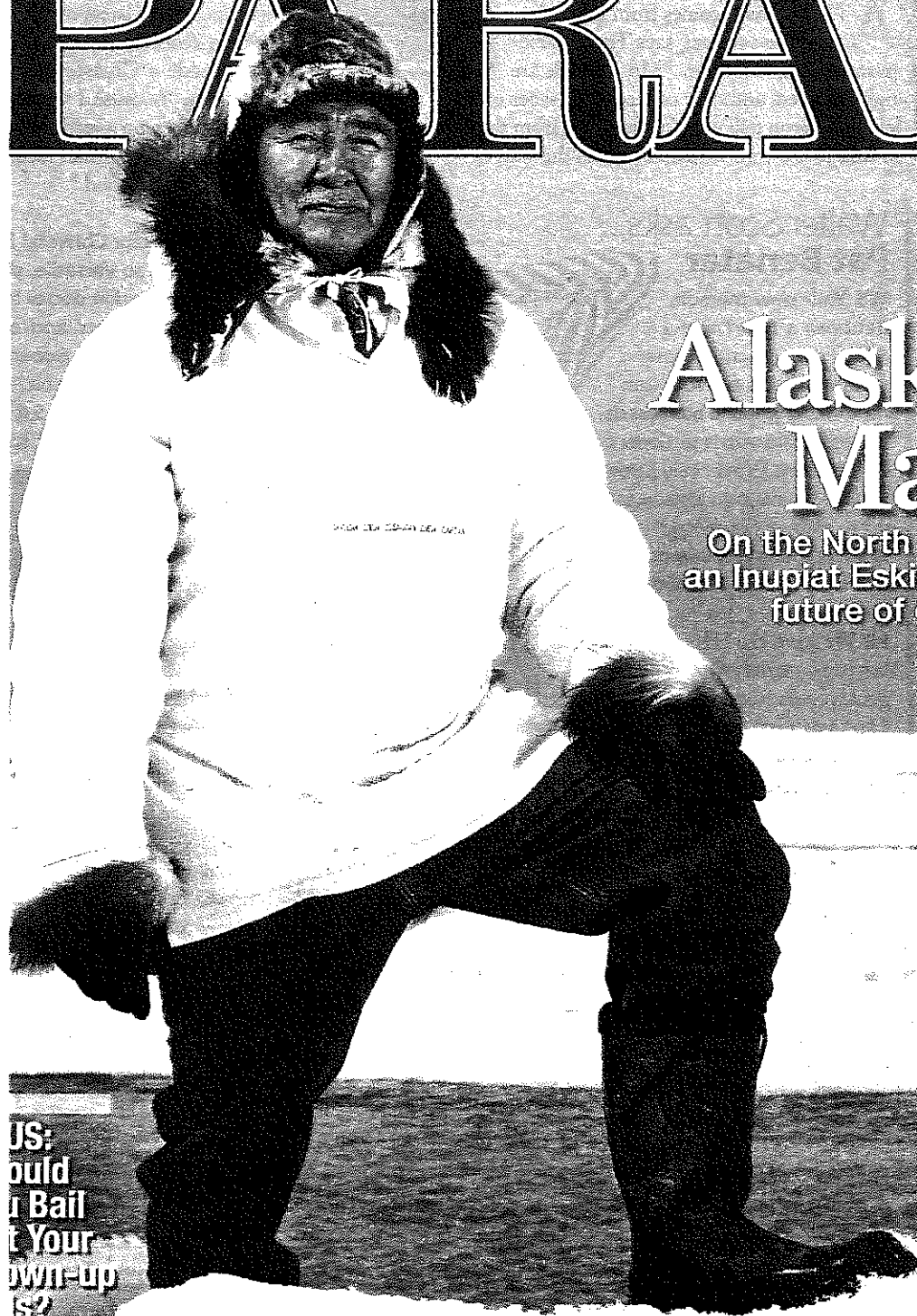


PARADISE

Alaska's Other Maverick

On the North Slope, Mayor Edward Itta,
an Inupiat Eskimo, may hold the key to the
future of oil drilling in the Arctic



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Alaska politician Edward Itta, an Inupiat Eskimo, stands at the center of our

The Mayor at the

by Bob Reiss



Mayor Itta alongside a traditional Inupiat whale-hunting boat in June. "If whales disappear," he says, "so will our culture."

EDWARD ITTA, 65, MAY BE ONE of America's most powerful mayors—but you've probably never heard of him. He governs the Wyoming-sized North Slope Borough of Alaska, a territory larger than 39 of our 50 states. However, his influence doesn't come from the size of that area but from what lies beneath the land and its adjacent waters. The North Slope contains the country's largest oil field, Prudhoe Bay, which is now producing less than one-third of its former peak flow. The next great energy find—up to 7 billion barrels of oil and 132 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, according to U.S. government sources—is thought to be under the Chukchi and Beaufort seas, directly offshore from the North Slope. Located above the Arctic Circle, the North Slope is home to some of the most remote and

beautiful landscapes on earth, including the 19-million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and just 7500 people. The majority of them are Inupiat Eskimos, including Itta. Temperatures can rise to 60 degrees in summer and plummet to 50 below during the winter.

At first glance, Barrow, the seat of the regional government and America's northernmost city, seems far from a nexus of power. Small homes perch on pilings to keep them from melting the permafrost. Their front yards—strewn with snowmobiles, drying racks for salmon or caribou skins, and sealskin whaling boats—are living museums of a people who value the outdoors. Not only is hunting an essential part of the culture, it's a necessary alternative to high food prices. In the AC Value Center, a loaf of

white bread is \$5.39 and a quart of milk \$3.95. In the last local census, 61% of residents who work full time and 89% of the unemployed reported getting more than half of their food from hunting and fishing.

He says about one visiting oil giant, 'I'll work with them, but they try my patience.'

There are also many signs of development, which Itta supports. Satellite dishes dot rooftops. Much of the infrastructure has been paid for by the \$250 million in taxes that the North Slope gets annually from energy companies. The high school, borough offices, and community-center buildings were funded

by oil money, as were the North Slope's Learjet 31 and the search-and-rescue unit's Bell 412 helicopters. Like his counterparts who live on the Gulf of Mexico, Itta struggles to balance his constituents' environmental and energy concerns. "Offshore drilling means the risks are great to the marine mammals we depend

Top of the World

on for subsistence," he says while watching a news clip of the BP Deepwater Horizon rig burn on TV in May. "We fear it may pollute the water, cause spills, frighten off whales with noise." Itta believes offshore drilling is inevitable, adding, "I'm not trying to stop the oil. But if whales disappear, so will our culture."

BP had hoped to start drilling for oil this fall on a man-made island near Prudhoe Bay, but increasing scrutiny may cause a delay. Other companies, including ConocoPhillips and Shell, have bought nearly four million acres of leases in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas. While they'd like to begin drilling exploratory wells, those plans are on hold due to the President's temporary ban. The waters they're eyeing also serve as migration routes for the bowhead whale, a staple of the Inupiat diet and culture. The mayor himself captains a whale-hunting crew that goes out twice a year.

Itta wields influence over energy policy by the deft use of lawsuits and research on environmental impact. He also utilizes oil dollars to pay for a lobbying firm in D.C. and for his trips to meet with decision-makers there. "The terms by which future oil will flow to the U.S. will be set in large part by North Slope residents," says Mead Treadwell, former head of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. "That's how important Itta is."

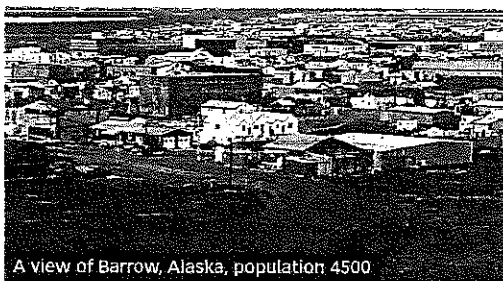
THE MAYOR'S LIFE REFLECTS the North Slope's blend of the old ways and the new. "I grew up without running water," Itta says. "We burned whale blubber for heat." For high school, he was sent to a U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school in Sitka. "I felt homesick. I cried a lot. I remember the first time I saw trees, cars. It was an alien world." After graduation, he attended an electrical technical school, served in the Navy, and worked in the oil fields at Prudhoe Bay. In office since 2005, he lives in Barrow with his wife, Elsie (a retired schoolteacher), and their daughter, son-in-law, and grandson.

Even though the North Slope depends on revenue from energy companies, its mayors have never mutely agreed to their wishes. In 2007, when Shell proposed an offshore-exploration program, North Slope lawyers

and environmental groups filed suit in federal court. "Too much, too soon, too fast," Itta says of Shell's plan.

Defeated, Shell used feedback from Itta and native groups to draft a version calling for new scientific research and prohibiting drilling in whaling season. It was issued an initial permit and expects to drill after the ban lifts. "We weren't listening closely enough to the mayor, and it was a mistake," a Shell spokesman concedes.

Even though Alaska's U.S. Senator Mark Begich, a Democrat, and former Governor Sarah Palin oppose the President's pause on offshore exploratory drilling in their state, Itta accepts it. (About Palin, he says, "She was in office such a short time that we had very little contact with her.") Of the Gulf spill, he adds: "I'm hoping that offshore practices everywhere will be scrutinized more closely, there will be more oversight,



A view of Barrow, Alaska, population 4500

and results will be better. We're not against development, but it must be done responsibly."

Itta refused to join native as well as environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, which sued to stop Shell's latest plan. The suit charged that the U.S. government did not fully consider the environmental consequences before issuing a permit. In Itta's view, "environmental groups do not represent our interests. They want to stop all drilling." Robert Thompson, an Inupiat guide and spokesman for REDOIL—a native group that joined the suit against Shell—responds: "If there were a spill here, how could Shell clean up oil under ice? I have a bad feeling about a company depending on a valve

to keep catastrophe from happening." He suggests that Itta changed his mind for financial reasons—the mayor, like all North Slope Inupiat, is a shareholder in a oil-field service company. But Itta supporters say he dropped the fight after he achieved his initial goal

FOR THE MAYOR, THE PRESSURE of juggling competing interests comes to head a few weeks after the Gulf spill began when Shell President Marvin Odum flew in to Barrow for a meeting with Itta. When the two men have a friendly working relationship, before the Shell group arrives Itta says, "It's a long way from trusting them. I'll work with them but they try my patience."

The mood in the meeting veers from cordial to tense. The Shell executives assure Itta that a blow-out like the Gulf catastrophe would be far less likely to occur in the Arctic because of shallower waters and lower pressure below the surface, and they hope he

Itta grew up without running water. For heat, his family burned whale blubber.

inform his constituents. "You always want me to explain to my people," Itta retorts. "That's not good enough anymore. Not or of you has said

Here's the difference between what happened in the Gulf and what we want to do here."

The executives stiffen. Odum says: "We'll be taking responsibility for explaining this. Our operation here is sensitive, our most important worldwide. Not doing right would destroy our reputation." He invites Itta to visit a drilling ship and to have a scientist for the North Slope monitor its emissions. After they leave, Mayor Itta says he is reassured but remains a bit uneasy about drilling's impact on marine life and on the 4000-year-old Inupiat culture.

"We were here before oil, and we will be here after it," he says. "We rise and fall with the bowhead whales."

Alaska Up Close

To see a slideshow on Mayor Itta and Barrow, go to Parade.com/itta