

A Park Resists An Oil Boom

Officials At North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park Work To Protect Land's Natural Magic

BY PAM LOUWAGIE

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THEODORE ROOSEVELT NATIONAL PARK, N.D. — From the vista where Valerie Naylor stands, the scenery is undeniably spectacular: Sculpted hills with layers of beige sandstone and ribbons of gray coal, pockets of cottonwood trees and junipers rustling, the serpentine Little Missouri River shimmering below.

Most visitors who come to the Oxbow Overlook feel its serenity. But Naylor, the park's superintendent, worries. "So much of what you're looking at is outside the park, and it's so vulnerable," she said.

How will she protect it all?

As North Dakota's historic Bakken oil boom mushrooms around this little-known national park, Naylor, 56, is on a mission to keep its natural sounds, fresh air and breathtaking views free from the effects of runaway industrial development.

With a drilling frenzy now hitting a production milestone of 1 million barrels of oil a day, that work is getting more urgent. Naylor's fight to protect the park reflects a larger drama still unfolding across this vast region as it struggles to balance the mind-boggling jackpot of the oil boom with its accompanying trade-offs. Almost every week it seems there's a new proposal near the 70,000-acre park, Naylor said. One week it's a cell tower. Another it's a salt-water disposal well. "If you don't keep your eye on everything, you could easily miss something that could have a massive impact on the park," she said. She estimates that she and her staff have tried to get changes on more than 20 development plans since the boom began, often through polite but firm letters, testimony and follow-up conversations.

Modest and plain-spoken, Naylor neither apologizes for nor touts her efforts.

The park is "a very special place," she said. "It deserves the same kind of protection as Grand Canyon and Yellowstone."

As Naylor eased a hybrid SUV up the park's north unit scenic drive, she pointed to a boundary fence amid fields of grasses and sweet clover. In the distance, an oil pump hammered slowly.

Though that well is still

within view of the park, it's better than it could have been, Naylor said. A few years ago, that pump and its large storage tanks and infrastructure were proposed for a spot right along the fence. It was one of the first developments that Naylor successfully worked with a company to get moved away.

Naylor wrote letters to the company, and representatives there were receptive to moving the pumping station almost 2 miles away, she said, but it took the company months of paperwork and negotiating.

"We're very appreciative," Naylor said. "It was very complex and a lot of work."

LIKE 'SWATTING FLIES'

To Naylor, the park is a perfect example of what a national park should be: wildlife, scenery and historical value. The park was named after the president who hunted buffalo in that area as a young man from New York, and later briefly lived there as a rancher while grieving the loss of his wife and mother.

Naylor's affinity for the place began more than four decades ago, when she visited with her parents as a teenager from Oregon. She vowed to come back. She volunteered there as young adult, did research there during graduate school, and became the park's superintendent 11 years ago.

Now, North Dakota has more than 11,000 producing wells, and the state's oil and gas division estimates capacity for 60,000 more, with drilling continuing for at least 20 years.

At times at some vistas, Naylor said a park visitor could see more than 20 natural gas flares shining in the distance.

With no single clearing-house for applications along the park's miles of jagged boundary, Naylor and her staff, along with the North Dakota citizen group Badlands Conservation Alliance, have been scouring meeting agendas of local and county governments and state commissions. They can only oppose the proposed developments that they see.

"There's so many things going on so quickly. It might be a pipeline, power line, oil well, rail loading facility or new road ... any number of things," Naylor said.

Sometimes companies don't even realize that they're proposing development near

the park boundaries, she and others said.

State officials proposed mandating a public comment period for certain oil and gas drilling plans up to 2 miles surrounding the park and 17 other areas deemed "extraordinary places" in North Dakota this year. Industry groups including the North Dakota Petroleum Council opposed the change, arguing that special interests shouldn't trump the rights of private landowners. Officials scaled back the idea to allow public comment time for only public land developments in those zones.

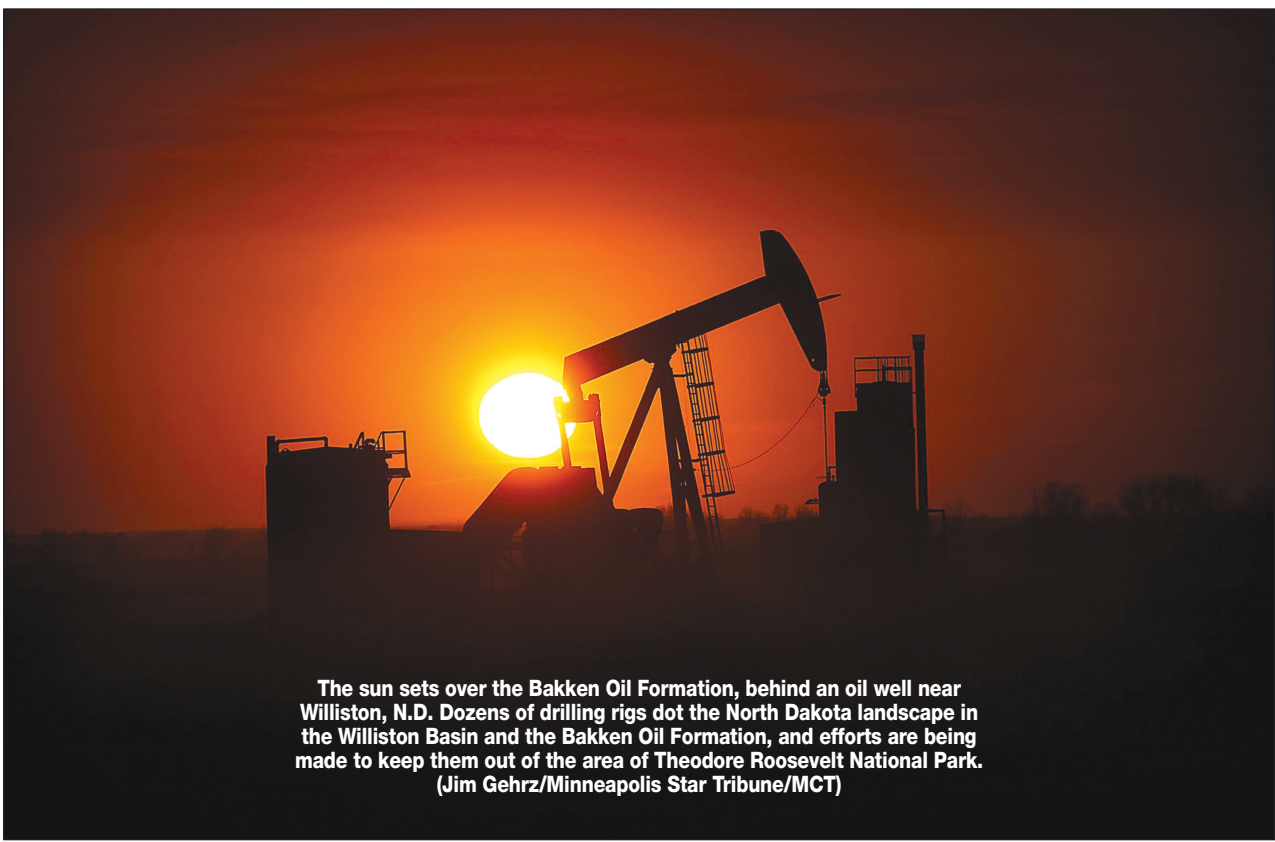
The national park boundary abuts some drilling-susceptible public forest service land, which already has more than 600 wells in the western part of the state.

Minneapolis hiker David Kingman said he's been watching the conservation efforts of Naylor and others with interest as he spends much of his time in North Dakota now, managing a worker housing complex. He treasures the beautiful scenery on the park's marked trails, as well as on its unmarked bison trails, he said. Fending off development nearby, he said, looks like "swatting flies."

"They've got to just keep working at it," he said, "but some get through."

SOUNDS, SCENTS AND LIGHT

Naylor and others want to protect not only scenic natural views, but also the park's solitude: The sound of blowing wind and singing birds, not the hum of traffic. The scent of sagebrush, not the sting of chemicals. The darkness of the



The sun sets over the Bakken Oil Formation, behind an oil well near Williston, N.D. Dozens of drilling rigs dot the North Dakota landscape in the Williston Basin and the Bakken Oil Formation, and efforts are being made to keep them out of the area of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. (Jim Gehr/Minneapolis Star Tribune/MCT)

night sky, not the glow of gas flares.

Typically, it works best to raise concerns directly with a company, Naylor said. Most are amenable, she said. She uses a diplomatic tone: "We are not opposed to energy development," she is quick to say, "but we want it done in such a way that the park is preserved."

New drilling techniques have made it easier for oil companies to comply with their requests, said North Dakota Petroleum Council communications manager Tessa Sandstrom.

"Thanks to the technology of horizontal drilling, you can be a little bit more flexible on where you put that drilling rig and still be able to recover the resources," she said, adding that companies "always try to keep an open dialogue."

One company put out a news release after abandoning a development plan, touting its commitment to preservation. Horizon Oilfield Services announced in April that it withdrew a permit application for an injection well near the park's boundaries. The company highlighted a "desire to preserve the natural beauty and integrity of North Dakota public lands and National Parks," the release said.

Jan Swenson, executive di-

rector of the Badlands Conservation Alliance, targets development in not only the national park, but in all sorts of natural areas in the state.

Often, she and Naylor will appear at the same meetings, Swenson said, though she added that Naylor is probably more of a "realist" in choosing what to oppose.

"Sometimes I wish the park service was even more aggressive," Swenson said. Still, she said, "we are ever so lucky to have her."

TOURISTS UNAWARE

As they drive the winding, scenic roads or march up the trails of the Badlands, most park tourists have no idea what Naylor and other preservationists have fended off. No idea that Naylor won an award for her stewardship from the National Parks Conservation Association.

Deb Hornfeldt and Debbie Virnig carefully maneuvered a 32-foot Forester camper on the scenic drive to Oxbow Overlook. It was their last national park stop on their way back to Lakeland, Minn., from a road trip in the western United States. They sought out parks to find serenity, they said.

"My stress level gets much smaller," said Hornfeldt, a recently retired teacher. "It's re-

ally important to have places like this. People crave this."

Oil pumpers and more flares and traffic would spoil the grandeur, Hornfeldt said.

"Find another place," added Virnig, who spoke in sign language with Hornfeldt translating. Natural spaces are getting smaller and smaller, she said.

With an average of fewer than 600,000 visitors a year recently, Theodore Roosevelt Park has never been among the country's most-visited. But as the population around it increases, the hum of the boom permeating the landscape, its popularity may increase.

On Christmas Day, for instance, when the park is usually abandoned, a dozen cars were in the parking lot, Naylor said. Oil industry workers now seek it out to get away from the constant construction, traffic, dust and noise that the boom has brought. That slice of serenity is more important than ever, Naylor knows.

Gravel crunched under Naylor's ranger boots as she hiked to the River Bend Overlook, which she pronounced "the most beautiful view in all of North Dakota." She held her wide-brimmed hat against the whipping prairie winds.

"I love this park," Naylor said. "I will continue to always protect it."

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