



Into the Thaw

Jon Waterman

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Into the Thaw is Jon Waterman's gripping firsthand account of the impact of development and climate change on North America's Arctic landscape.

In his powerful memoir, Waterman documents "extraordinary changes" in the Arctic over the past four decades. A veteran wilderness guide and park ranger, he notes that rising temperatures have caused extensive thawing of the permafrost. Thermokarsts (slumping landslides) have become more frequent, lakes are disappearing, rivers are clogged with silt, and shrubs crowd the tundra. The impact on polar bears, salmon, musk oxen, and other wildlife has been dramatic.

A skilled outdoorsman, Waterman relates dozens of enthralling excursions into the Arctic wilderness. In a casual, conversational voice, he writes about adventures clambering over tundra trails and kayaking icy waters, hoping that the remote wilderness might "confer peace and beauty to my soul." His metaphors emphasize the place's strangeness; he describes the Brooks Range as a "gigantic, mangled" extension of the Rocky Mountains still "engaged in a planetary rugby match" and calls the tundra an "overfilled bazaar filled with feces of all sizes and shapes, story-filled track paths, and fur caught on a branch."

The book is full of stunning full-page photographs, including a striking study of caribou swimming shoulder to shoulder across the Alatna River, panoramic mountain views, and multiple depictions of the activities of Inuit people. Making a fervent case against oil drilling in the Arctic, Waterman notes that if oil fields are built west of the Kongakut River, the US would "gain less than a year's supply of fuel over an expected half century of exploitation, while oil contractors would strike it rich."

Into the Thaw is a sinuous, passionate memoir devoted to observations of the Arctic's remote and astonishing landscapes—and the alarming effects of climate change upon them.

KRISTEN RABE (November / December 2024)

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