

Frozen:

Ice, Arctic Ecosystems,
Wildlife and Indigenous Culture

By Paul Smith

“Southerners”—as people from north of 60 call us—experience water mostly as a liquid. But people in Canada’s north and especially north of the treeline, experience water more as a solid. Indeed, complex descriptions of snow and ice are multitudinous in Indigenous languages and also in the scientific vocabulary required to describe, research and predict how arctic environments behave. Pack ice, multi-year ice, drift ice, fast ice, bergy bits (yes, bergy bits!), growlers, polynyas, floe edge.... The water cycle is fundamentally different in the Arctic.

Flying into Resolute (Qausuittuq) in the Central Arctic on a brilliant, May day was my introduction to the frozen arctic world. As far as the eye could see, the blindingly white, still-frozen ocean was dotted with intricate, turquoise pools of meltwater and occasional circular, dark blue seal breathing holes. Then flying on to Pond Inlet (Mittimatalik) on Baffin Island, we passed massive seabird nesting colonies with hundreds of thousands of squawking murrelets, guillemots, kittiwakes and fulmars. Approaching Pond Inlet, we flew over the glacier riddled Bylot Island and its sprawling mountain peaks. In the distance was the floe edge—where stark white ice meets black ocean—a hub for Inuit hunters and for marine wildlife waiting to enter the still frozen Lancaster Sound or Tallurutiup Imanga. This is why I was there—as a wildlife biologist to help document wildlife populations. This entire region is now a massive national park and national marine conservation area (announced in 2017).

30 Canada’s arctic is primarily the Inuit Nunangat, the Inuit homeland encompassing 35 percent of Canada’s landmass and 50 percent of its coastline. That includes

Nunavut, Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador), Nunavik (northern Quebec), and the Inuvialuit region of the Northwest Territories.

For many communities across Nunangat, most food comes from the sea and often from the frozen ocean. The under-ice ecosystem is central to the Inuit staple food, the ringed seal or natsiq. Sale of skins of ringed seals is also a lynchpin in the Inuit economy—and we’ll come back to that point. In a remarkable evolutionary adaptation, millions of ringed seals, under solid ice, maintain breathing holes over winter by scraping the ice. The seals feed in the mysterious, under-ice ecosystem on Arctic Cod, amphipods and other invertebrates.

Inuk hunters hunt seals at these breathing holes. In spring, the floe edge is a rich source of country food as well, with walrus, beluga, narwhal, harp seal and bearded seal. Polynyas are permanent open water areas in the Arctic due to strong currents that also provide—sometimes dangerous—hunting opportunities after other areas have frozen over.

My own Métis ancestors were buffalo hunters on the plains, feeding themselves and making pemmican for the fur trade. Trapping and furs is still an important source of income helping many Indigenous people live on the land, in the arctic and elsewhere. The cash economy is part of living on the land. There is no fantasy “subsistence” economy divorced from the market economy.

Obviously climate change is profoundly affecting Arctic communities, more so than our own temperate



regions. “Our sea ice, which had allowed for safe travel for our hunters and provided a strong habitat for our marine mammals, was, and still is, deteriorating. ...the human fatalities that had been caused by thinning ice, the animals that may face extinction, the crumbling coastlines, the communities that were having to relocate—in other words, the many ways that our rights to life, health, property and a means of subsistence were being violated by a dramatically changing climate.” Sheila Watt-Cloutier (*The Right to Be Cold: One Woman’s Story of Protecting Her Culture, the Arctic and the Whole Planet*).

Yet climate change is not the only negative effect of southerners’ lifestyles on the Inuit communities of the Arctic. Many southern activists’ opposition to hunting, meat consumption and fur clashes with Indigenous peoples’ cultures, use of the land and both traditional and modern economies. The ringed seal, the staple of the Inuit diet, is also a driver of economic and social well-being in the Arctic.

The recent film *Angry Inuk* documents the terrible hardship and devastation imposed on Inuit communities through European bans on sealskins and campaigns by animal activists. The campaign against sealing by animal rights organizations and Greenpeace in the 1980s led to devastating impact on Inuit communities, leading to poverty and social disruption. Greenpeace recently apologized to the Inuit for that action in an effort to “decolonize” their organization. Then a new EU ban in 2009 posed another threat.

Inuit activists were organized this time and had access to social media. A twitter campaign was launched,

posting “Sealfies” of Inuit people posing with their sealskin clothing, seal meat or hunting seal. They tagged onto Ellen Degeneres’ tweets, a prominent animal activist celebrity. But while there was lots of publicity, there was also ugly, racist backlash from animal advocates. The same backlash was on view recently in Toronto when an Indigenous restaurant had seal meat on the menu. Similarly, vitriolic, racist social media attacks were made on an Alaskan boy who was first to help land a Bowhead Whale to feed his community.

Southern activists and Indigenous people are not always allies. Hunting, trapping and eating meat—including seal—is central to most Indigenous cultures. And colonialist misconceptions are not restricted to governments and corporations. Greenpeace figured that out.

Arctic peoples depend on their cold and frozen ecosystems. Water is life. Ice is life.

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The new national marine conservation area, together with Sirmilik National Park, Prince Leopold Island Migratory Bird Sanctuary and the Nirjutiqavvik National Wildlife Area, now bring the total protected area in the region to more than 131,000 square kilometres[,]” which is roughly the size of Nova Scotia, P.E.I., and New Brunswick combined.

Sara Frizzell, “Boundaries set for Lancaster Sound, Nunavut, Canada’s largest area of Protected Ocean,” CBC NEWS, August 15, 2017