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Perspective: Is it naïve to think the Arctic can be transformed in a positive way?

By Tundi Agardy, Contributing Editor, MEAM. Email: tundiagardy@earthlink.net

In a very short time, the story of the Arctic has seemed to morph from a case study in international law that only a policy wonk could love to a sobering story of a dystopian future. As the ice recedes and access to the riches of the pole opens up, Arctic nations are clamoring to secure rights and wield new technologies in shipping and oil and gas exploration and extraction that will promote short term profitability while likely threatening long term sustainability. Environmental conditions, and their rapid rate of change, have turned a laboratory for negotiation and cooperation into the Wild West.

If there were ever a case for a holistic approach that takes the long (and big) view, it is the newly transformed, and increasingly vulnerable, Arctic region. With the loss of ice and new ability to crisscross the northernmost latitudes, the future of the Arctic is no longer the domain of surrounding countries with their established Exclusive Economic Zones. Where previously the fate of the tundra, ice cap, hydrocarbon-rich seafloor, and intensely productive marine waters in between could be determined by bilateral agreements between neighboring countries and indigenous communities, the fate of the new Arctic is a global issue. But no governance mechanism currently exists to represent global interests in the debate, and the Arctic Council – the intergovernmental forum of Arctic nations, observer nations, and permanent participants representing Arctic indigenous communities – will have to decide the future of the region on behalf of the world.

EBM could put the Arctic on the path to rational resource use

The drama at the North Pole also creates an opportunity. A commitment to EBM could put the Arctic region on a path to rational use, proactive and adaptive management, and holistic governance that includes Arctic communities dependent on the polar ecosystem. This is a region where the typical gaps that serve as an excuse for inaction do not exist. There is plenty of science, and reams of data, to support an EBM approach. There is the governance framework of the Arctic Council. Critical areas for conservation have been carefully identified (e.g., here, here, here, and here). There are heart-tugging flagships, like the starving polar bears, to attract international attention and launch campaigns for conservation. Watchdogs carefully track the progress of Arctic nations against the promises made in treaty commitments and in Council agreements. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF), for instance, produces the Arctic Council Conservation Scorecard – rating the Arctic countries on how well they are doing in place-based conservation, fisheries, black carbon, oil spill prevention, shipping, and EBM.

Let's hope that the narrative quickly moves away from the dystopian future and back to the necessary diplomacy that would allow the nations on the Arctic Council to chart a sustainable future. That would require an open acknowledgement that EBM is not just one of many things that nations might or might not do, but rather the essential core that should be at the heart of all future agreements and action plans. (See the WWF scorecard for which nations score high in this regard, and how national attention to EBM compares to attention to other aspects of environmental management.)

Such a step might require a new 'language', or new way of assessing and addressing collective values. Peter Neill, director of World Ocean Observatory, sees a well-intended but failed conversation taking place at the multi-national policy, governance, and action levels. Differences in colonial vs native and scientific vs cultural vocabularies mean that people are using the same words with different meanings, and speaking and hearing without understanding each other. In his upcoming book *Cryotopia - A Vision for Sustainability in the New North*, he will argue for a new vocabulary and method for conflict resolution to resolve the enduring conflict between consumption and sustainability in the Arctic.

Imagine an ecosystem-oriented agreement for the Arctic

Obviously, the North and South Poles have very different situations – the Antarctic is an uninhabited continent in which territorial claims cannot be extended to the continental shelves while the Arctic is an inhabited region with sovereign jurisdictions of coastal states as well as the Central Arctic Ocean beyond national jurisdictions. However, I ask you to imagine an Arctic CCAMLR (Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources) – an international agreement focused not on fisheries, shipping, or energy, but on all the above, with maintenance of subsistence use, ecosystem functioning, and biodiversity conservation as the primary underlying goals. Indeed, it is precisely because the Arctic region is inhabited, and because the transformations taking place there present both need and opportunity, that an ecosystem-oriented agreement could be a game-changer.

The Arctic Council should work to achieve harmonized EBM that places the interests of indigenous peoples above maritime industries, commit to lasting protections for sensitive and important Arctic ecosystems within Arctic nations' borders, and develop a plan for the central Arctic Ocean beyond national jurisdictions that protects critical areas in perpetuity. In these times of nativism, populism, mistrust, and erosion of international institutions, such utopian ideals may seem a hopelessly naïve contemplation. But Arctic nations have an opportunity here to show true leadership – leadership that represents the interests of all humanity, for today and for the tomorrows to come, rather than just special interests.

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