

Welcome to the Polar Environment Times!

Last year saw the first edition of the *Arctic Environment Times*. This year it has been re-named the *Polar Environment Times* to reflect the incorporation of contributions received from the southern latitudes. **BY STEINAR SØRENSEN AND THE TIMES EDITORIAL TEAM**

The Antarctic and Arctic have many similarities as mentioned in the contributions – most particularly as sensitive indicators of global climate change. The disintegration of the Larsen Ice Shelf on the Antarctic Peninsula that has been proceeding over the last few years has been mirrored most recently in the breakup of the Arctic's largest marine ice shelf, the Ward Hunt in northern Canada.

The Arctic also stands in contrast to the Antarctic in that it has a permanent human population that calls it home. Many of the contributions in this edition of the *Times* reflect in particular the perspectives of Arctic indigenous peoples, and this continues to be a priority for us at GRID-Arendal. We were especially pleased to be able to host a seminar in Arendal in September with the participation of a number of indigenous representatives, the Indigenous People's Secretariat, and the Chair of the Arctic Council, and note that a number of the articles appearing here were generated from the vibrant discussions that took place.

The Arctic remains high on the political agenda, as can be seen from our Ministerial correspondents who write cogently about a range of Arctic issues. The recent expedition to Svalbard hosted by the Norwegian Minister for the Environment, Børge Brende, has had a visceral impact on the participants. The will to make real progress on the Arctic environment and sustainable development issues exists now perhaps as never before.

The issues are real and daunting: the impacts of climate change and pollution on ecosystems and humans; the unsustainable and damaging exploitation of natural resources; the fragmentation of habitats; and threats to traditional ways of life from the development of infrastructure; and, other pressures. New issues are also arising, and it is the intent of the *Polar Environment Times* to provide a canvass for all stakeholders to voice their concerns and perspectives.

GRID-Arendal wholeheartedly thanks the contributors to this edition of the *Polar Environment Times*, and invite our readers to provide feedback and to read more articles on our web site, www.grida.no/environmenttimes. We look forward to continuing our work representing UNEP in the polar regions and working in cooperation with our Arctic and Antarctic stakeholders.

Cheers!

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The Arctic – a new victim of global development?

The vision of the Arctic before the global community is a contradictory one. While on the one hand it is seen as the last frontier – a limitless, rich environment that can be exploited for commercial gains – it is also seen as an unspoiled area of pristine beauty, which can and should be preserved in all its glory. **BY SVEIN TVEITDAL**

The Arctic is both rich and extremely vulnerable – rich in natural resources such as timber, oil, gas, minerals and fish. Vulnerable since these resources are getting increasingly attractive to industry, consumers and decision makers located far beyond the Arctic.

Resource exploitation is already creating environmental hot spots in the Arctic as it faces reduction of its wilderness area by 50 percent over the next fifty years if strong action is not taken to protect it. Global climate change warms this region at a rate twice the world average, melting sea ice, interrupting the food chain, and threatening wildlife on which some indigenous populations depend on for food, medicine, and clothing. Long distance air pollution emanating from main industrial areas of the world is poisoning the entire food chain from micro-organisms to human beings.

The Arctic's indigenous peoples that have lived in harmony with the Arctic nature for thousands of years are now seeing their existence threatened by global development, even bringing some groups to the brink of extinction. It is important to remember that these Arctic peoples are not the causes of the environmental deterioration – the major

impacts are coming from activities beyond their direct control and from regions far removed from their home.

Nature might however strike back. The threat to the Arctic is also a threat to the global environment and the well being of everyone on the planet. Arctic climate change and melting of permafrost accelerates global warming. Reduction of species and wilderness contributes significantly to a reduction in global biodiversity. Over-fishing puts the global catch at stake.

Do special conditions exist for a different kind of sustainable development of the Arctic region? Will Arctic development become just a component of the development process that has characterized the rest of the world? Will traditional Arctic societies and cultures be taken as a basis for sustainable development in the region? Will an alternative model of development specific to this region emerge?

I know answers to these questions are not easy. They challenge the very basis of the current process of globalisation. After all, it must not be forgotten that the Arctic region has over the years become a well-integrated part of the international political and economic



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Press releases from the Ministry of Defence on June 12th and 23rd 2003, suggest that an increase in allied training exercises will accompany the new NATO command center.

Feelings among the Saami people and representatives are running high. "Norway offers traditional Saami reindeer areas to NATO for bombing purposes totally without our consent or approval", says Sven-Roald Nystø, president of the Saami Parliament. Ragnhild Nystad, vice-president of the Saami Parliament adds: "Completely unacceptable without any agreement with the Saami people. Sacred sites must be left in peace and it is very disrespectful to the Saami people to do this", a message conveyed also by Samuel John N. Anti, chief of the local herder district.

"NATO has never bombed or will target any location with religious or sacred sites. We only address strictly military targets. That also applies to training and exercises, of course, and we trust that member countries do the same. We would be most opposed to any such thing", says Francois Le Blevennec,

press officer at NATO, Brussels.

In Norway, the response to the issues being raised with UN officials by the Saamis is measured: "We do not consider this a formal complaint to UNHCHR and thus not legally binding in any way", says Eirik Bergersen, spokesman for the Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. "Besides, in order to have any legal effect, the Saamis will need to have exhausted national level procedures – including all court systems – before they can complain. Norway supports the ILO Convention and works internationally to support indigenous rights. But we were not aware that any sacred or religious sites were involved in these existing or proposed bombing ranges", he says.

Unregulated piecemeal development can be devastating

In addition to the concerns raised by expanding military exercises, there are significant issues about increasing private and public sector development in the Barents region, and the impacts this may have on the Saami people. Some studies suggest that over one third of the traditional lands – used for reindeer

system. Can the Arctic region develop the means to escape the depletion of its natural resources that form the basis of our current developmental model?

UNEP welcomes the initiatives and efforts made by the Arctic Council in assessing the state of the Arctic environment and making recommendations to policy makers on its conservation. We also welcome similar efforts made by parliamentarians, indigenous peoples and the scientific community of the region through the University of the Arctic.

UNEP is also pleased that through enhanced environmental awareness, action is being taken by the Arctic governments and stakeholders to protect the Arctic environment. Clearly, sustainable development of the Arctic is an emerging challenge that only can be achieved through global cooperation and action.

UNEP, with its key polar centre GRID-Arendal, is dedicated to placing the sustainable development of the Arctic on the global agenda. Amongst our main priorities are the Arctic environment and a sustainable future for the Arctic indigenous peoples. Their survival and future well-being will be the best indicator of sustainable development of this rich but vulnerable region of the world.

This increased awareness and the willingness of the partners to work together for the Arctic will be on the global agenda both at the Special Session of UNEP' Global Ministerial Environment Forum in March next year in the Republic of Korea as well as that of the Commission of Sustainable Development meeting in New York in April 2004.

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grazing over thousands of years – may already be lost due to piecemeal development of roads, powerlines, dams and recreational cabins. By 2050 – in a scenario of unregulated development – as much as 78 percent of the vital coastal summer grounds may no longer be viable for reindeer herding. The proposed opening of the Barents Sea for full oil exploration also has the potential to contribute to coastal development and provoke further disputes over land use. Similar conflicts between development and the chosen lifestyles of indigenous people arise around the Arctic. The Nenets people in the Yamal Peninsula of Russia are being affected by oil and gas exploration and development, and similar issues arise in Alaska and much of northern Canada. Indigenous peoples have often fought against – but have also sometimes successfully cooperated with - multinational power and oil companies.

While protocols are developed to address climate change issues, the issues of military activities and piecemeal development conflicting with traditional land use still presents one of the greatest policy gaps in the Arctic. Without facing up to these issues, hope will dwindle for many who wish to live with the land as hunters or herders.

CHRISTIAN NELLEMANN is a Senior Associate in the GRID-Arendal Polar Programme, and is working on a report on the possible futures for the Saami people and their traditional lifestyles in the Barents region. The report will be released in the spring of next year. **INGUNN VISTNES** holds a position in the Department of Ecology and Natural Resource Management at the Agricultural University of Norway. She has conducted research in the Polar regions with emphasis on development, indigenous peoples, and impacts on wild and domestic reindeer