



Engaging with the Arctic: Reflections on Climate Risks and Resilience from the Arctic Circle Assembly

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“What happens in the Arctic doesn’t stay in the Arctic.” Versions of this tongue-in-cheek—yet apt—catchphrase were heard time and time again throughout the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, Iceland, applied to issues from governance and security to climate and environmental challenges.

During the three-day event featuring heads of state, indigenous leaders, researchers, NGO officials, and many other Arctic stakeholders, it became clear that individual Arctic issues cannot be effectively examined in isolation, but need to be understood in the context of complex social, geopolitical, environmental, and climatic interrelationships that extend far beyond the geographic boundaries of the Arctic Circle itself.

For some time, I’ve felt daunted at a distance by the climate perils our northern neighbors face—trying to remain calm through the IPCC reports that have outlined the outsized effects global warming is already having on the Arctic Circle, and how much more intense devastation can be wrought under different warming scenarios, with cascading consequences throughout the world. At Fletcher, however, I’ve committed to building more internal resilience for the next phase of my sustainability policy career...and I knew that it was time to look beyond the

neotropical conservation issues of my “comfort zone” to confront the challenges I hadn’t yet had the courage to study more closely, including the Arctic.

So for my “Climate Risk and Adaptation” class with Professor Erin Coughlan de Perez, I decided to write my risk brief about Arctic Ocean fisheries, including impacts on Inuit and Icelandic communities. And when Professor Rocky Weitz shared the opportunity for a Fletcher student delegation to attend the Arctic Circle Assembly, with its staggering array of climate-focused sessions, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to gain perspectives from those most immersed in Arctic issues.

At the Assembly, hearing from Inuit people whose livelihoods and communities are suffering the devastating impacts of melting permafrost that damages infrastructure and forces relocations or from shifting patterns of fish and marine animals that make traditional hunting more difficult—and other direct and indirect results of climate change—provided a sobering vision of the scope of the risks and hazards they face.

Alongside these stark scenarios were many examples of Arctic innovation, including city-level initiatives to build resilience following the COVID-19 pandemic, sustainable growth of the “blue” (ocean-based) economy, and my personal favorite, a session on nature-based solutions to help mitigate climate change in Arctic regions, drawing on initiatives from near-Arctic neighbors. Several of my fellow Fletcher students also pitched their ideas for sustainable Arctic innovation at a session with graduate students from other U.S., Icelandic, and Norwegian universities. Our conference experience was enriched by numerous informal discussions with Fletcher alumni in attendance, faculty from other universities, and session speakers from NGOs and governments engaged in promising projects.

Perhaps one of the most unexpected and encouraging elements of the conference was how speakers on geopolitics, shipping, and other disparate topics wove climate change into their narratives. The celebration of scientific advances throughout the Assembly was likewise heartening.

Some of the most memorable moments happened outside of the conference venue: a Fletcher breakfast with U.S. Ambassador David Balton to discuss his experience leading Arctic negotiations, a dinner with the inspiring Global Maritime Forum CEO Johannah Christensen, and a tour of the Iceland Ocean Cluster incubator



Professor Weitz (R) and Benjamin Brimelow MGA'23 (L) at the Iceland Ocean Cluster incubator

space with Professor Weitz and our delegation to learn about emerging Arctic Ocean industries, to name a few. At the Cluster visit, we heard about efforts to scale up their “100% fish” initiative to maximize the percentage of each fish that is used for food, nutritional supplements, medical products, and other uses—sharing the processes and philosophy with other countries. It drove home the point that environmental sustainability can generate substantial economic gains: the parts of the fish that some might consider “byproducts” can, in fact, bring much higher returns on investment than the fish filets, if supporting industries are developed.

After a long couple of years without travel for business or continuing education purposes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, being in a setting where people from countries around the world are collaborating on solutions to climate and environmental challenges felt refreshing and invigorating. Now, back at Fletcher, the profiles in resilience and determination I witnessed at the Assembly are ingrained in my memory—I’m adding them to my mental toolbox of pragmatic, science-grounded optimism that my Fletcher professors have been so instrumental in helping me cultivate.

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