

The Arctic affects us all, just not equally

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‘What happens in the Arctic affects us all’ may well be true. But today’s popular slogan for the fight against climate change must not be used to justify putting our own needs and interests above those of Arctic peoples.

It’s probably fair to say that much of today’s concern about the Arctic is in fact a concern about climate change. Some of this is focused on the Arctic’s unique environment and wildlife—especially the polar bear, once imagined as a [ferocious man-eater](#) and now as a [helpless canary](#). But the [broader worry](#) is that a massive melt of Arctic ice will accelerate global warming and raise the sea level, drying out productive farmland and drowning coastal cities all around the world.

In other words, much of today’s concern about the Arctic is less about the Arctic itself, and more about how the Arctic threatens the rest of us. Making it worse is the apparent irony that climate change also enables industry to penetrate—and perhaps to pollute—virgin Arctic territory formerly protected behind a shield of ice. And it seems that in the vanguard of this northward push are the very oil and gas companies that trade in the ingredients of climate change.

A [popular slogan](#) for this vicious circle of concerns goes like this: ‘What happens in the Arctic doesn’t stay in the Arctic’. No less a figure than Admiral Robert Papp, the new US Special Representative for the Arctic, has [repeated it](#) in a major speech. Others make the point more directly. At the recent People’s Climate March in New York, for example, [Greenpeace activists](#) wearing T-shirts printed with the words ‘The Arctic affects me’ and ‘The Arctic affects you’ marched behind a banner that boldly proclaimed ‘The Arctic affects us all!’

The concerns are serious, even if the slogans sound a bit hackneyed. But put in such terms, it all seems rather back to front. It’s the rest of the world that affects the Arctic—and not simply because climate change, to which Arctic peoples barely contribute, impacts the Arctic earliest and hardest. If we worry

about the Arctic primarily because we fear for our own communities, then we [encourage ourselves](#), wittingly or not, to place our needs and interests above those of Arctic communities.

This was the cautionary note I sounded in a [recent op-ed](#) for *The Arctic Journal*. It was prompted by a slightly lopsided survey of global attitudes towards the Arctic that Greenpeace had [recently published](#). So far as Greenpeace are concerned, ‘the world has spoken’ through their survey—and what the world demanded was both a ban on offshore oil drilling in the Arctic, and a marine sanctuary completely off-limits to industry in the international waters of the central Arctic Ocean.

For my part, I argued that Greenpeace had exaggerated the survey results somewhat. But more significantly, they had also glossed over data showing that respondents from Arctic countries—who have to make a living there—felt considerably less enthusiasm for bans and sanctuaries than their counterparts from non-Arctic countries. This was especially true of countries wholly within the Arctic, such as Greenland and Iceland. As I went on to point out, it wasn’t the first time that Greenpeace seemed to turn a deaf ear to the Arctic voice.

It’s not that Arctic peoples shrug off the risks of climate change or offshore oil drilling. On the contrary, the survey data confirm that, on the whole, they [remain both](#) wary of the costs and hopeful of the benefits. Even the most optimistic among them hardly wish for an armada of drilling rigs to ride the wave of global warming to their beautiful shores. But many do wish for the political and economic self-reliance that responsible oil development could bring—and perhaps nowhere more so than across the North American Arctic, where Inuit still struggle with the social and economic damage of colonisation. Sadly, the worst of [what happened in the Arctic](#) really did stay there.

To their credit, Greenpeace have contributed positively to the debate, conducting [speaking tours](#) and sponsoring [original research](#) on economic alternatives for the Arctic. They have also offered [powerful assistance](#) to those Arctic peoples who agree with their uncompromising stance on industrial development, or who have [lost confidence](#) that their leaders strike the right balance between environment, industry and society. Nevertheless, as they stressed in their response to my op-ed, they ‘maintain the right to disagree’ with those in the Arctic who value compromise more than they do.

Disagreement is one thing, and managing disagreement well is another. The unabashed way Greenpeace [championed the right](#) of Clyde River Inuit to reject oil exploration on one side of Baffin Bay sits uncomfortably alongside their [disregard for the right](#) of Greenlandic Inuit to approve oil exploration on the other side. Some principle is presumably at work here, but Inuit could be forgiven for doubting it has much to do with their [free, prior and informed consent](#). And Inuit might well wonder what other impositions Greenpeace consider justified because ‘what happens in the Arctic doesn’t stay in the Arctic’ and ‘the Arctic affects us all’.

Indeed, Greenpeace appear to believe the most appropriate reaction to such criticism is simply to reiterate these slogans more firmly. In their response to my op-ed they conjured up the image of an ‘Arctic butterfly’ flapping its wings over the North Pole and wreaking climate havoc across the globe through some chaotic crescendo of cause and effect. As they put it, my error was to challenge this ‘principle’, and to suggest ‘that the millions in southern regions of our planet whose livelihoods are threatened by the melting ice—and the subsequent oil rush we are witnessing in the Arctic—should just sit back and watch the show’.

Far from it. What I in fact suggested was that global civil society should have a say in the Arctic debate—only that Arctic peoples should be heard above the din. This doesn’t mean that what happens in the Arctic doesn’t affect us all, or that the international community—and especially not [tiny Kiribati](#), facing inundation by the rising sea—should passively accept the consequences. It also doesn’t mean that some coordinated global action isn’t necessary or urgent.

But it does mean that Arctic peoples, and the countries of which they are citizens, have rights and responsibilities over the Arctic that others simply don’t have. Inuit in particular have made this point [resoundingly clear](#). Why not help them fulfil those responsibilities—for instance by campaigning for all Arctic states to adopt the [extraordinarily strict](#) financial liability regime under which Greenland has cautiously permitted oil exploration? Surely that would be more constructive than brushing aside their rights by campaigning for a total ban instead.

What happens in the Arctic might not stay in the Arctic—but what happens in the rest of the world doesn’t stay there either. Banning Arctic offshore oil drilling won’t alter the already troubling trajectory of climate change. If anything, Arctic peoples can only hope that the rest of us stop burning such

prodigious amounts of fossil fuel that we derange the seasons by which their elders lived, and on which they can no longer wholly rely.

Respecting the needs and interests of Arctic peoples may well mean tolerating scrupulously well-monitored oil development there, whilst at the same time cooperating to tackle climate change. However that may be, Arctic peoples expect to be heard on these issues, which affect them most directly. Between slanted surveys and suspect slogans, however, Greenpeace often appear regrettably eager to be heard first.

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