



## Extractive Industries and the Arctic: Historical Perspectives on Environmental Change in the Circumpolar World

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**Convenors:** John Sandlos (Memorial University of Newfoundland/RCC) and Arn Keeling (Memorial University of Newfoundland)

**Presenters:** Frank Tester, Professor (School of Social Work, University of British Columbia), Alla Bolotova (Arctic Center, University of Lapland), Arn Keeling (Geography, Memorial University of Newfoundland); Paul Josephson (Rachel Carson Center, Munich; Colby College, Maine), Dag Avango (Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden), Richard C. Powell (School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford), Gavin Bridge (Durham University, UK), John Sandlos, (History, Memorial University), Mark Nuttall (University of Alberta and Greenland Climate Research Centre/University of Greenland), Andrea Procter (Labrador Institute of Memorial University), Nancy Langston (Great Lakes Research Center, Michigan Technological University), John Thistle (Labrador Institute of Memorial University)

The concept of a workshop on extractive industries in the Arctic grew out of an idea circulating in the popular media and commentaries on the Arctic: that the warming of the region and melting of the polar ice cap will lead to a new era of prosperity in the region as resources, particularly oil, are unlocked for exploitation. With governments in many Arctic nations staking their promises of improved social conditions on an offshore resource boom, it seemed timely to examine the social, economic, and environmental impacts of previous resource booms while turning a critical eye on the promises of the current resource rush. We thus assembled an interdisciplinary group from fields as diverse as environmental history, anthropology, geography, and social work. These scholars work on major Arctic nations throughout the circumpolar world, such as Canada, Russia, Sweden, and Greenland. For comparative perspective, we also invited resource geographer Gavin Bridge to participate in our keynote panel and historian Nancy Langston to share her work on copper mining controversies in the northern Michigan region. Such a fertile mix of diverse disciplinary and geographic perspectives, not to mention the quality of the work presented, provided for an extremely engaging exchange of ideas and information. The two workshop days could have easily stretched to four or five.

We began the first evening with a public address from Frank Tester, Professor at the University of British Columbia and author of important works of Inuit history such as *Tammarniit (Mistakes): Inuit Relocations in the Eastern Arctic, 1939-63* and *Kiumajuk (Talking Back): Game Management, Community Development, and Inuit Rights in the Eastern Arctic*. The talk, "Not Frozen in Time," focused on photographic representations of Inuit in Canada during the post-World War II era, when they were, as Tester noted, undergoing one of the most rapid periods of social, economic, and cultural transformations that any indigenous group has ever experienced. During the 1950s, Inuit communities faced an acute economic crisis due to the collapse of white fox fur prices and the decline of caribou herds, a situation punctuated by high profile cases of starvation. The Inuit "problem" attracted a host of anthropologists, geographers, government officials, and journalists, many eager to document Inuit life through the lens of the camera. As Tester highlighted, however, many of these photographers created a problematic image of happy Inuit integrating seamlessly with modern white communities or tenaciously pursuing traditional ways in the face of intense pressure to modernize. Tester argued that photographers generated these images as part of a broader search for Eden-like innocence after the horrors of World War II and in reaction to the rapid growth of consumer society in the industrial south. By projecting images of innocence, however, many of these photographers ignored the pressing social problems and challenges that faced Inuit communities during this period.

The following day we turned our attention to the submitted workshop papers. We began with Paul Josephson's work on the development and transformation of Arctic cities during the Stalin era in the Soviet Union, particularly the creation of company towns that amounted to mass slave labor camps. Josephson argued that, despite the fact that Soviet arctic industries relied more on intensive exploitation of labor rather than heavy technological inputs, the human and environmental cost was far higher than in resource extraction zones in the capitalist world. Alla Bolatova's paper jumped forward in time to the 1950s, examining three mining towns in the Murmansk region (Kirovsk, Apitaty, and Kovdor). The paper traced the experiences of voluntary settlers in industrial towns carefully planned according to

Soviet ideals, suggesting that many merged their identity as mine workers with their embrace of a northern life that offered close contact with nature through subsistence and recreation activities.

After lunch, Dag Avango presented his work on the [Assessing Arctic Futures Project](#), particularly his research on the way that various national actors have mobilized history and heritage as a means to provide legitimacy to claims over resources in the Svalbard Archipelago in the European Arctic. In a similar vein, Richard Powell highlighted the ways that Canada, Russia, and Denmark have mobilized geoscience and undersea mapping techniques to press their competing claims for an extension of sovereignty over the Lomonosov Ridge. Powell showed how these claims, based on the idea that the ridge is an extension of the continental shelf of the three nations, have further cemented the idea that the Arctic as a resource frontier. Many of these themes were echoed in the public “Arctic Futures” panel, held that afternoon in the Department of Geography and featuring Dag Avango, John Sandlos, and Gavin Bridge. Avango initiated the discussion, extending his work on Svalbard to consider in further detail the connections between resource development and Arctic utopian dreaming. Focusing mainly on Canada, Sandlos surveyed various historical instances of imagined Arctic resource utopias (as mass reindeer ranch and as a mining frontier) to analyze the promise and pitfalls associated with the projected offshore oil and gas boom. The panel concluded with Bridge’s brilliant reflection on the many ways that networks of actors consciously produce the idea of the Arctic as storehouse of resources, and in so doing insert Arctic spaces into material networks of commodity production and circulation.

Our last day was devoted to case study research on the complex relationship between northern indigenous communities and individual mines or mining regions. Mark Nuttall discussed competing ideas of nature that have emerged in contemporary debates over mining development in Greenland. While Inuit perceptions of environment are embodied in complex ideas of becoming, Nuttall highlighted how mining companies employed very different images (the land as wild and uninhabited; the resource frontier) and practices (mapping, surveying, etc.) that repeat processes of resource colonialism that have occurred elsewhere. Andrea Procter turned the discussion toward Labrador, arguing that Inuit responses to proposed uranium development in the 1970s and the land claims processes that eventually produced the Inuit territory of Nunasiavut were confined within a dominant neo-liberal discourse that sought the withdrawal of the state from Inuit affairs, while simultaneously confining Inuit demands for territory to areas that did not threaten development interests. In the final morning paper, Arn Keeling used archival and oral history evidence to analyze the first conscious attempt to use Inuit mine labor at the North Rankin Inlet Nickel Mine (1957-62). Keeling argued that the mine has provoked complex reactions among former Inuit workers, who acknowledge the impact of the mine and town life on hunting and trapping lifestyles but who also maintain a strong positive identification with their mine histories.

Our afternoon session covered parallel themes, with Nancy Langston providing a paper on indigenous resistance to a massive open pit taconite iron mine (the GTAC mine) in the boreal north of Wisconsin, USA. Langston recounted a long history of resistance among the Anishinabeg of the region. Anishinabeg objections to the GTAC mine are grounded in their close connection to wild rice and fishery resources, but also to a long historical legacy of mineral-led colonialism and toxic loading associated with the

mining industry in the Lake Superior basin. John Thistle's paper on the development of major iron ore deposits in Labrador beginning in the 1950s described the deleterious social and environmental impacts of mining for indigenous communities. He also described how the development of massive taconite deposits mobilized a complex web "brute force capital" from outside Canada, and provided one major impetus for the development of the St. Lawrence Seaway as a shipping corridor. By the end of the day, we were all struck by the many continuities among these case studies of mining and indigenous communities, particularly the complex ways the local perceptions of nature interact with the advance of mining capital into remote regions.

Throughout the workshop, we were faced with many difficult questions about the past and future role of extractive industries in the Arctic. We asked continually what was particularly "Arctic" about our case studies—whether resource development proceeds here in much the same way in other hinterland regions. Is it possible, we queried, for Arctic nations to improve social and economic conditions for indigenous communities primarily through resource development? How might sudden influxes of external capital, migrant labor, and material interact with local social and environmental conditions in the Arctic (cf. William Cronon's notion of the "paths out of town")? How do the constituent parts of Arctic ecosystems get reimagined as resources? How are notions of history, heritage, space, and place used to assert various claims over arctic resources? We look forward to at least attempting to answer these critical questions as we develop a book project out of this workshop.

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