

ACTIVITY REPORT



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Arctic Frontier 2024 - Activity Report

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The *Arctic Frontiers: Actions and Reactions* conference took place from 29 January to 1 February 2024. This was the first Arctic Frontiers conference held after Norway assumed chairship of the Arctic Council from Russia. The conference theme, “actions and reactions,” provided a useful lens through which to view many of the pressing issues facing the Arctic today, from the perspective of people from many different countries. A few panels that I found particularly interesting are detailed below.

Wildland Fires Sharing Circle: Arctic Indigenous Peoples on Fire Practices, Changes, and Impacts

On 19 October 2023 the Arctic Council launched the Wildland Fires Initiative, which highlights the importance and pressing nature of wildland fires in the region. As someone who was evacuated from the City of Yellowknife in the summer of 2023, I was excited to see this initiative and curious to listen to the panelists in the sharing circle who shared their traditional experiences with fire and how the relationship with fire is complex since it is both dangerous and important. This relationship can be characterized by a saying that was shared: “Fire is both a helpful friend and a strong master.” One participant referencing Canada said that “the country is burning up” and noted how, since 1965, sixty-five percent of the lands in his part of the world have burned.

Participants provided a range of answers to questions about existing or workable solutions. The importance of controlled burns was brought up, and how years of controlled burning being banned means that there is an excess of material that can catch fire. Education was also brought up as an important step, and the panel was cited as an example of what needs to happen in this respect. Community planning in terms of evacuation and response to fires were highlighted. The panel allowed for people from different nations and different backgrounds to share their cultural practices and bring to light actions they think will be effective against wildland fires.

Global Actions - Arctic Reactions

This was one of five of the conferences big picture panels. The others were: Arctic Security – Local Resilience, Navigating Arctic Realities, Rethinking Arctic Development, and Insights in Arctic AI. This session, as implied by the title, reflected the conference’s theme of “action and reaction,” with a memorable quote from the session being: “what happens in the Arctic will not stay in the Arctic.” During this session, a participant pointed out that

there is a tendency to focus on reaction rather than proactive action. The session covered a wide range of topics from how the Arctic Council can function without Russia, to the green transition in the region. One session member reminded everyone that, despite the narrative of geopolitical change dominating much of the recent focus, the Arctic itself remains a relatively peaceful place. The importance of the Arctic Council functioning as a body that convenes a wide range of people to discuss ideas was emphasized throughout the session.

Inaction & Overreaction: Perspectives on Climate, Resilience, and Security in the Arctic

Stéphane Dion, Canada’s special envoy to the EU, opened this panel session by focusing on the impacts of climate change. He highlighted eight impacts of climate change: melting sea ice, decline in types of vegetation, declining marine fish stocks, increasing invasive insects and plants, forest fires, thawing permafrost, increasingly unpredictable weather and flooding, and seasonally uncommon ice-free passages. He followed with an elaboration on what their impacts might be and how Canada is taking action to enhance collaboration in the Arctic to mitigate negative effects. In the panel following his initial reflections, participants stressed the importance of investment in infrastructure and economic development. They also underscored the caveat that everything must be done in consultation with Indigenous Peoples, following the saying, “Nothing about us, without us.”

Arctic Security – Local Resilience

This session was another big picture event and covered the topic of Arctic Security and how it can relate to and connect with local resilience. It was brought up that when discussing security, there is a difference between threats in the Arctic versus threats to and through the Arctic. Accordingly, it must be determined who is at threat.¹ The increase of militarization in the Arctic brought up that nations should be consulting and working together with local Indigenous Peoples. In terms of local resilience and preparedness, questions such as how to help communities with emergency plans and how they can then be helped with executing those plans came up. Jackie Jacobson, a Canadian Ranger from Tuktoyaktuk, spoke about how, as a Ranger, he serves as the eyes and ears in the North, and how all Rangers are volunteers who were born and raised in the communities in which they serve, giving them invaluable local knowledge. The panel concluded that the Arctic presents a unique operating environment and that getting into communities is vital to enhance understanding of the region.

¹ North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network members will note that this framework is clearly derived from Whitney Lackenbauer’s “Threats through, to, and in the Arctic: A Canadian Perspective” in *On Thin Ice? Perspectives on Arctic Security*, eds. Duncan Depledge and Lackenbauer (Peterborough: NAADSN, 2021), 26-38.

Human and Environmental Security in the Arctic: Perspectives from Indigenous Women Scientists and Researchers

A very important point brought up at the beginning of this session was that Indigenous Peoples are typically placed in a “soft security” box because typically they are who speak out on soft security issues. However, Indigenous People need to be fully integrated into discussions and deliberations about hard security, thus requiring a shift from a fixation on superpowers in terms of hard security considerations. Reconciliation was also brought up given that responsibilities with respect to Indigenous Peoples cannot be overlooked when it comes to self-determination and security. When looking towards the future, the session framed it through individual futures versus holistic futures. The importance of words was also underlined since there is discussion about “one Arctic” and “one future,” but the implementation and understanding of these concepts matter because we are all individual people as well as members of distinct peoples. The session left off with how people need to consider the significance of Indigenous value systems and how they relate to everything that we do.