

Arctic youth discovered similarities between their distant countries

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Two of the Arctic Resilient Communities Youth Fellows enjoying a break at the beach in Sisimiut, Greenland.
Photo: ARCYF

In the new Arctic Resilient Communities Youth Fellowship, 17 young people from Alaska, North Canada and Greenland traveled to each other’s countries. While their cultural roots were the same, their political systems proved different.

In the summer of 2023, 17 young people from across the Arctic were gathered for a workshop in Sisimiut, Greenland. The workshop had gone well; the participants had been in Nuuk too, and met with local politicians and business owners.

Next stop on the program was the *Kalaalliaaraq*, the fresh food market where locally caught and hunted food is sold. The place was beaming with meat from whales, musk oxen, and especially reindeer, as it was the middle of the hunting season.

“The Canadian and Alaskan visitors were shocked to see that Greenlanders were allowed to sell the animals they caught. They were both exasperated and inspired. Where they are from, they have to share all their game and are not allowed to sell it,” said Konkordia

Sørensen, a consultant who was in charge of the Greenland activities at the Arctic Resilient Communities Youth Fellowship (ARCYF) workshop.





The first photo shows the fellows when they first met in Anchorage in March 2023. Number two and three show fellows at a museum in Sisimiut, Greenland, and the fourth one, also in Sisimiut, show the fellows as they compare dogsled designs from across the Arctic. Photos: ARCYF

Fellows from across the Arctic

This example above is just one of many cultural exchanges that took place during the ARCYF's inaugural year. Aside from the summer workshop in Greenland, the fellows also met in Anchorage, Alaska, in March 2023 and in Yellowknife, Canada, in January 2024 where they received their diplomas.

And this exchange of knowledge across the Arctic that the workshops helped foster is imperative and urgent, according to Ian Laing, executive director of the Institute of the North, the Alaska organization who lead the program.

“The Arctic is changing and it’s changing very fast. These remote communities are going to be heavily impacted both by climate change and increased activities from resource development, tourism and other things,” Ian Laing told Polar Journal.

The participants in the ARCYF were all between the ages of 19 and 27, and their homes were far apart but entirely Arctic. Seven were from Greenland, both from the north and the south, four were from Alaska, two were from Canada’s Yukon Territory, two from Canada’s Northwest Territory, and two from Nunavut, also in Canada.

And the vast geographical spread was not a coincidence.

“What we focused on was trying to identify and recruit promising young leaders from across the Arctic, leaders that will empower these communities with skill sets and knowledge that will help them make meaningful differences,” Ian Laing told Polar Journal.



A map showing the remote and distant locations from which the fellows came. Photo: ARCYF website

The long, expensive travels

But in spite of all the learnings and the positive evaluations, the first year of the fellowship may also have been the last. Gathering people across the vast differences of the Arctic is not only important, it is also not cheap.

“The program is very funding dependent. We did not fully appreciate how expensive this kind of program would be. Travel to Greenland and northern Canada is extraordinarily expensive and things always go wrong,” Ian Lain said.

As an example he mentioned one fellow, who had to spend 8 or 9 days getting back home. She is from Dutch Harbor on Unalaska, an island in the Bering Sea, and to get there from Yellowknife, Canada, she had to travel over Vancouver, Edmonton, Seattle, and Anchorage in freezing temperatures that delayed many flights.

“The logistics of this is not to be underestimated. We are dealing with some of the most extreme climates and remote communities in the world,” he said, and continued:

“We have learned so much over this year. I am really excited to see where it can go. It has potential to get at some of the most significant, long term issues that we are trying to address in the Arctic.”

“But we don’t have all the money to continue yet,” Ian Laing said on a phone line from the Arctic Frontiers Conference in Tromsø, Norway, where he, perhaps by including other countries, was trying to secure funding for another year.





In January 2024, the fellows visited Yellowknife, Canada, where they received their diplomas, engaged in traditional drumming and knitting. Photo: ARCYF

The differences that surprised

No matter what the future holds for the ARCYF, the fellows in the 2023 edition helped 17 young people discover the diversity of the Arctic. Often it was not the many similarities but the differences that made the biggest impressions.

“The majority of the participants were Inuit, but I think if you asked them about it, they would tell you that it was interesting to see the similarities but also that there were big differences in how their cultures have developed in different parts of the world,” Ian Laing said.

And as the encounter with the fresh food market in Sisimiut showed, Arctic communities are not all the same. They may have similar cultural roots, but the vast differences between, and the different political systems they live under, have had an impact on their societies.

“The reactions of the young people were mixed. Some said that if we sell the meat, we can’t be sure that everyone will get some, that the elderly will also taste the local food. They thought that the culture of sharing that is so important to Inuits had disappeared in Greenland, and I had to tell them that it hadn’t,” said Konkordia Sørensen, who is Greenlandic.

“Others could see that if hunters are allowed to sell their meat, we make sure that they can also make a living from their craft,” Konkordia Sørensen told Polar Journal.

“After this it became clear to me that ‘wow, there really are big differences’,” she said.

Ole Ellekrog, PolarJournal

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