

The North Policy Briefing

International Arctic collaboration is key



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In February, the European Union's chargé d'affaires in Ottawa flew to Iqaluit to meet with Nunavut government officials and members of the Legislative Assembly, and to speak to high school students.

This month, the managing director for the Americas of the European External Action Service will undertake a similar mission to meet Nunavut Premier Eva Aariak.

Maria Damanaki, member of the European Commission, participated in a recent conference on the Arctic and met with Arctic Council Minister Leona Aglukkaq in Trömsö, Norway.

What is all this EU business up North, you may wonder?

The European Union's territory reaches far into the Arctic. Parts of Sweden and Finland are situated well above the polar circle.

Denmark, another EU member state, is responsible for the foreign affairs and security of Greenland. Although this autonomous territory itself is not part of the EU, its education system benefits from funding of about 25 million euros annually under the EU-Greenland Partnership Agreement.

Iceland is negotiating accession to the EU and Norway regularly adopts union legislation under the provisions of the European Economic Area.

All these countries, including their Arctic territories, are subject to EU legislation or are directly affected by it. They also benefit from EU investment in the regional economic development and cooperation (at 1.14 billion euros, 2007-13).

The same is true for some 450,000 EU citizens who live north of 60, among them the Saami, the only indigenous people in the EU.



Nunavut Premier Eva Aariak and EU chargé d'affaires Manfred Auster.

Saami communities are not limited to the EU though: significant numbers also live across the borders in Norway and Russia.

Together with the Inuit and four other indigenous peoples of the North, Saami representatives enjoy a special status as permanent participants on the Arctic Council.

The EU is a supportive and transparent partner in the Arctic region. EU lawmakers are aware of their special responsibility with regard to the region and its people. In an ongoing process the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council are shaping a comprehensive EU policy towards the Arctic region in dialogue with its Arctic partners.

But the EU also co-operates with Arctic stakeholders beyond its borders. Since 1999, the EU has led, together with Russia, Iceland and Norway, the Northern Dimension, a policy framework focusing on co-operation and economic development, primarily in northern Europe.

Until recently, Canada contributed as an active observer to the Northern Dimension Partnership on Health and Social Well-Being. The EU wants to engage more with Arctic partners to increase its awareness of their

concerns and to address common challenges in a collaborative manner.

The EU contributes significantly to polar research, both in the Arctic and in Antarctica, among them numerous projects for the International Polar Year. Renowned European research institutes, such as the British Antarctic Survey, the French Institut Paul-Emil Victor, and the Alfred-Wegener-Institut für Polar und Meeresforschung (Germany), contribute profoundly to the knowledge of the changing polar regions.

Here again, international collaboration is the key rule—and always open to Canadian researchers.

The European Union and its member states are at the forefront of the fight against climate change. European legislation adopted in 2009, the so-called climate package, will reduce CO2 emissions by 2020 by 20 per cent as compared to 1990 levels. The EU also committed to the long-term target of 80 to 95 per cent reduction of its emissions by 2050.

Climate change is affecting Arctic peoples and wildlife at a much faster pace than the rest of the world. An EU-funded assessment of its own current and future Arctic footprint shows a significant socio-economic and environmental impact. Thawing permafrost and retreating multi-annual sea ice are but the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Urgent action is required and the EU is ready to contribute with a specific regard to circumpolar co-operation.

An example of the need for co-operation relates to the protection of polar bears. At the recent conference of the CITES convention in Bangkok, member states discussed a proposal

to list polar bears as an endangered species and therefore banning the international trade in polar bear products.

The EU sees increasing risks for polar bears from loss of habitat due to climate change rather than from trade. Consequently, the EU, like Canada, did not support the motion to uplist polar bears under CITES, which, therefore, did not get a majority.

Together with others, the EU presented alternative measures instead. While supported by many, some argued that existing national management measures were sufficient. Here, a chance for closer co-operation was missed. But there are other fora.

The most important international forum for co-operation on Arctic issues is the Arctic Council. The EU applied for permanent observer status in 2008. This status, as defined by the Arctic Council, would allow the EU to intensify co-operation, align its Arctic activities and continue to make a positive contribution to the work of the council on issues such as maritime safety, oil spills, climate change adaptation, and black carbon.

The next ministerial meeting takes place in May, following which Canada will assume the chair of the group. At the meeting, ministers will also have to decide about the EU's application. Support from all members of the Arctic Council and the permanent participants would send a strong signal to the international community that a co-operative approach is the method of choice to ensure a sustainable development of the Arctic region, its peoples and wildlife. Canada, a strategic partner of the EU, will play a decisive role.

The journeys up North by EU officials have a dual purpose: to listen to the people of the region and to explain EU policy. There are myths to be dispelled and a lack of information to be rectified. But, as it turns out, this is the case on both sides.

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