

Editorial: Who Owns the Land?

Are the arctic islands north of Canada owned by Canada? Yes, but since the islands are largely unpopulated, why not have an Antarctic-type treaty in the North, with reasonable and shared access for everyone in a peaceful sort of way?

Antarctica can be a model, but certainly not a perfect model, since the Antarctic Treaty is apparently yielding to profound pressures for exploitation of ephemeral mineral resources and possibly for increased militarization of the Pacific. Clearly, attempts to make Antarctica into an international park have been frustrated by these pressures. Yet, as imperfect as the Antarctica model is, it still provides a starting point for something equally important in the North.

Accordingly, why not make a circumpolar park of all polar islands in the North inside of 75°N that are not subject to the Inuvialuit final agreement or the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut comprehensive claims negotiations? That would mean making polar islands into demilitarized zones, including nuclear weapons free zones, as well as environmental preserves with protection from mineral exploitation.

Why not put the whole superpower threat into some kind of perspective? If Moscow wanted to destroy the industrial base of the U.S.A., all it has to do is to advertise for a few underemployed nuclear technicians to manufacture and commercially deliver a few industrially oriented nuclear warheads to appropriate places in America, in a manner far more cost effective than using ballistic weapons systems. So, also, if the Americans wanted to do the same to the Soviets, they could use the same mercenaries with equally effective results. So all the nonsense about ICBMs, submarines, cruise missiles and star wars could be done away with.

Sooner or later, we need simply to say that superpower rivalry is basically rivalry for resources and markets, and that the whole militarism bit is totally groundless — just a bottomless sink for funds that can be more properly used in other ways.

If the foregoing were taken as being the way things are, what are the implications for research in the Arctic? Some people might say that since the inside-75 region will have been declared off limits to militarization, there is no need whatever for northern research. Others, however, will say that such a declaration could usher in a whole new era of northerly work. “Now,” they will say, “we can get on with what needs to be done!” Now, we can get on with serious polar oceanography unhindered by military considerations, in a totally cooperative way among the polar nations. We can get on with the study of northern peoples with a view to recognizing their enormous cultural wealth. Now we can get on with plate tectonics and paleoclimatology. We can do all the social science that needs to be done; better still, we can watch the northerners do their social science and political science. We can study the bugs and the beetles the way it should have been done. We can pursue real-time global climatology like never before. We can set up communications across the polar cap with the term “surveillance” now having a positive meaning for the peace and welfare of northern people.

Who owns the land is probably not very important — it never was in the pre-European view of things. The land was there to be fairly shared by all. Who owns the waters is also likely to be of little importance once the military component has been rooted out. The efforts previously directed toward military deployment can now be directed effectively toward environmental protection under international agreements that everyone subscribes to. Military officers are then succeeded by environmental “rangers” protecting and managing the arctic commons.

Then the polar institute being promoted in Canada could acquire a degree of vision, and the scholarly communities of the North could get on with what needs to be done with a measure of confidence and excitement never experienced before in the Canadian Arctic.

By offering Canadian arctic islands and associated waters as a demilitarized international park, say under the control of the United Nations, the Canadian nation would be seen to be taking an enormous step forward on the world scene by dissociating itself from the global arms race and by showing an enlightened and determined leadership never before contemplated in northern latitudes.

— *Gordon Hodgson*