

Is Anyone Behind *The Shield of Achilles*?

At the annual council meeting of the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies (ACUNS), held at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia on 28–29 November 1997, a group of Canadian academics and administrators representing all 31 universities and institutes with northern teaching and research interests met to discuss—among other things—the future of northern science. The author of this commentary has attended these meetings for more than a decade, and was secretary-treasurer of ACUNS for the period 1989–93, when cash resources were just beginning to reflect the onslaught of federal government budget cuts. Since my tenure on the board of ACUNS, parallel provincial and territorial cuts have supplemented these federal prunings, and their combined effect is now all too evident in the northern academic orchard. A snow goose's eye view of the situation reveals significant budget attrition across the country, not only in universities and institutes, but also in federal programs like the Polar Continental Shelf Project, the Northern Scientific Training Program, aid to publishing of scholarly journals (from both the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research [NSERC] and Social Sciences and Humanities Research [SSHRC] granting councils), and of course ACUNS itself. Added to these cuts is the malaise besetting the Canadian Polar Commission, which has languished without a chairperson since last September and played no role whatsoever in preparing the Canadian delegation for the UN Framework Kyoto Conference on Climate Change. Indeed, none of the ACUNS Council members knew of anyone who had been consulted on the Kyoto process by the federal departments.

At the heart of the Association's concern is replenishment of the current stock of northern scientists. As a group, this preponderantly male cohort is aging well, but aging. It is not uncommon for those who regularly attend northern science symposia and conferences to comment on the sea of gray heads in the room and the continued signal service of the federal Science Advisor Emeritus, Fred Roots. Like Fred, many of his cohort now volunteer their services and continue to apply for small grants from international sources to undertake their work. Their careers have continued in retirement as much more than hobbies; they are in effect exemplary displays of national scientific citizenship.

So what of the future? Today in the Yukon there is just one young tenure track scientist, Dr. David Hik of the University of Toronto at Scarborough, beginning his formal career in northern research. A decade ago, at least five were getting underway. One can read a similar trend across the country as reflecting the impact of the funding cuts upon university career choices.

On the plus side, 130 students attended the annual Northern Students' Conference, which paralleled the ACUNS council meeting at Simon Fraser. Interestingly, young women formed the majority of paper presenters and poster session participants. Popular topics included natural resource management, co-management regime development, oral history documentation, and traditional environmental knowledge. Northern students from both the provincial mid- and territorial Norths were represented, and their research reflected local research needs and in many cases participatory methodologies. Many of the students at their poster session sites talked of careers in consulting, in government, and with aboriginal organizations formed by the beneficiaries of settled comprehensive claims. Tenure-track university careers were also mentioned, but cautiously so, and realistically tempered by Generation X suspicion of future opportunities.

As a northern country with a proud tradition of northern scientific accomplishment, we need to worry now about developing new university career opportunities; someone has to be present to instruct the following generations, Y and Z, and those who follow them. The Internet can't do it alone, and Fred Roots will want to retire some day!

REFERENCE

SYMONS, T.H.B., and BURNET, P. 1988. The shield of Achilles: The report of the Canadian Polar Research Commission study. Ottawa: Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. 26 p.

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