

AINA at 60: Leaping Towards a Bright Future Hand in Hand with a New Generation

The Arctic Institute of North America (AINA) officially saw the light 60 years ago, when it was chartered by an Act of Parliament in December 1945. With World War II in their rear-view mirrors and the Cold War a yet poorly defined haze in their headlights, Canadian and American governments worried that the potentially resource-rich Arctic regions of North America remained a vast and poorly monitored territory of enormous strategic importance. AINA was created as a binational organization to start filling up a gaping hole in our respective knowledge bases. “To advance the study of the North American and circumpolar Arctic through the natural and social sciences, the arts and humanities and to acquire, preserve and disseminate information on physical, environmental and social conditions in the North” has been AINA’s motto since its inception. It is just as appropriate now as it was then, as the Arctic is making a serious comeback in the consciousness of the world’s populations.

While the Cold War, sovereignty concerns, and the quest for energy were the main drivers for northern research in North America during AINA’s first 45 years, the decade that followed, from 1990 to 2000, saw the collapse of Arctic research, especially in Canada, through government cutbacks. The fall of the Berlin Wall, a dizzying drop in energy prices, and a fading memory about disputed sovereignty issues conspired to make the Arctic research scene bleaker than a foggy winter’s night on the shores of Hans Island. Only a few of the many university-based northern outfits that had sprung to life in the heyday of Arctic research managed to survive. AINA was one of them, and it did it through some very imaginative fund-raising, but more importantly, through a faithful membership that believed in the Institute’s mandate and remained highly supportive of its many initiatives. Survivorship, indeed one of AINA’s most enduring qualities, had been tested by more than one episode of its history, including the heart-wrenching move of its headquarters from McGill University in Montréal to the University of Calgary almost 30 years ago to this day [for an overview of AINA’s rich and at times tumultuous history, see Dr. Robert MacDonald’s historical account in this issue of *InfoNorth*].

Ironically, I too was born and raised in Montréal and came to Calgary to pursue my doctoral studies just a few years after AINA’s great escape to the West. The Geological Survey of Canada, another storied organization, was my scientific home for nearly 25 years, as I enjoyed the exciting career of a field geologist, hopping up and down mountain ranges on Ellesmere and Axel Heiberg islands. But not to worry: taking AINA back to Montréal is *not* the reason I took on the position of executive director, nor is it on my “to-do” list. The chance to tackle an exciting, yet daunting challenge at a time of growing northern opportunities enticed me to embark on a career shift that will enable me to influence the future direction of a great organization.

I have been in the saddle for half a year already, which is more than enough to realize what the challenges are, but also to appreciate the richness of the cast of AINA supporters worldwide, the strengths of some of its initiatives, and the remarkable dedication of some of its key players. You can discover more about AINA’s breadth of activities in our newly redesigned website at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/aina>, to be launched in the new year. Allow me to mention a few of AINA’s main actors: Dr. Karen McCullough, who puts this excellent *Arctic* journal together, combining the wit of a scientist and the rigour of a world-class editor; Ross Goodwin, who at the helm of the Arctic Science and Technology Information System (ASTIS) manages to find the funding to make this very useful database grow year in and year out; Andy Williams, who runs the Kluane Lake Research Station in the Yukon Territory as a very fine establishment indeed, one that caters to an ever-growing number of researchers from Canada and abroad; and Dr. Carl Benson, who has kept the torch of AINA U.S. Corporation alive and is now generating renewed interest for the Institute at the University of Alaska, while passing the baton to a younger generation.

And therein lies AINA’s biggest challenge: to entice a whole new generation of students, researchers, and faculties of the arts, humanities, and physical, biological, and social sciences to get involved in the North. We need to convince them that some of the 21st century’s most exciting issues lie in the land of the midnight sun, to make them appreciate that remote communities need sound research, with the full participation of their populations, to assess their own long-term

survivability. New issues and new concerns about the North, its environment, its populations, its strategic importance, its disputed sovereignty, and its rapidly changing climate, just to name a few, appear almost daily in the media. The melting of sea ice, the thawing of permafrost, the erosion of coast lines and the flooding of low-lying hamlets will change the face of the North alongside economic development, resource exploitation, and pipeline development. Change is the name of the game, change happening at a ferocious pace that has probably never been experienced by any population in human history. Of course, the world needs Arctic research and a venerable organization like AINA has a major role to play.

Bringing a whole new generation of young researchers to the front, while maintaining a rich following of experienced researchers is a big part of the challenge. But how can we bring computer-savvy twenty-somethings—whose intellectual quests often start with Google and end, sometimes but not always, in a library—to become members of an organization like AINA, and to partake in its initiatives? How do we make them realize that contributing to a membership pool will benefit them as much as it will benefit the organization? To me the answer is clear. It is through innovations and a constant reassessment of how we do things that we will find the way to engage the next generations.

To that end we have hired Dr. Dawn Johnston, fresh with her PhD in Communication and Culture, to help AINA navigate through its transformation. It will start with a physical move, not back to Montréal, but three floors down in the same building here at the University of Calgary. Dawn will spearhead the development of a better presence for AINA on the Web, the establishment of a Northern Studies program at the university, and an application to join the University of the Arctic, building on the strong northern interests on the campuses of the University of Calgary, University of Alaska, and other educational and cultural institutions. Dawn will help us develop a corporate image that will cater to a new generation of prospective northern researchers and scientists, while offering a better package to our traditional membership.

I strongly believe that this is an exciting time to be involved in the North. Things will be happening fast, funding will be available, and opportunities will exist to renew AINA's membership in general and a northern research capacity in particular. The International Polar Year will bring focus to the Arctic and Antarctic and will become the springboard for sustained funding and research effort in the 21st century. It is my utmost goal to make sure that AINA will be part of this exciting development every step of the way. The comfort of a "legislated mandate" should not blur our vision; nor should it stifle our renewal. On the other hand, the Institute has some genuine strengths to build from, including a vibrant group of research associates, and more importantly, you, the faithful readers of the journal *Arctic* and subscribing members to AINA. Together we will grow and leap forward, hand in hand with a new generation, at a time of unprecedented change and opportunity in the Arctic regions of the world. Please join us in leading the way.

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