

# InfoNorth

## Circumpolar Young Leaders Find Common Ground at IPY 2012

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### INTRODUCTION

**W**ITH IMMENSE ECOLOGICAL AND INDUSTRIAL change in the circumpolar Arctic, the voices of Northerners themselves, especially youth, are often lost. While northern elders saw the transition from nomadic life to community life, the current generation of northern youth is seeing the transition from a few visitors in the isolated Arctic to increasing large-ship traffic in the developing Arctic. The capacity of Arctic communities to deal with climatic changes depends on the ability of youth to cope with varying social and economic circumstances (Sydney-Smith et al., 2010). With many strong, northern voices as role models, young leaders are emerging across the circumpolar Arctic. Recently, under the guidance of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) and Schools on Board, 13 Circumpolar Young Leaders had the opportunity to bring their voices forward at the April 2012 International Polar Year Conference *From Knowledge to Action*, held in Montreal.

### CIRCUMPOLAR YOUNG LEADERS PROGRAM (CYLP)

Circumpolar youth applying for the CYLP had a chance to share their stories and express their opinions in an open online forum in which they responded to the following: “Tell us your stories,” “Where does your knowledge come from?” and “How can we take action?” (IISD, 2011). From the applicants, 13 were selected and completed online learning sessions based on the themes of Arctic sustainability, traditional knowledge, and leadership. During the traditional knowledge sessions, CYLP participants had the opportunity to conduct research projects with local knowledge holders about climate change, natural resource use, traditional knowledge and education, bringing all this information together for a poster that was presented at the conference (Grabowski et al., 2012).

The Circumpolar Young Leaders team finally met in person on Sunday 22 April 2012 in Montreal, Canada (Fig. 1). Participants, who had flown in from Russia, Finland, Denmark, northern Canada, and Alaska, represented a variety of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal circumpolar communities. In addition, every teammate had a different



FIG. 1. CYLP group in Montreal. Back row left to right: Alex Kellner, Niko Partanen, Julia Loginova, Chelsea Ford, Minnie Naylor, Emma Kreuger, Ivalu Rosing. Front row: Jodi Gustafson, Pauline Gerrard, Caitlin Baikie, Kelsi Ivanoff, Dorothy Bootle, James Kuptana, Meagan Grabowski. Front seated: Kiera-Dawn Kolson.

educational and professional background; thus they brought together ideas from various disciplines, from linguistics to community development to Arctic ecology.

### CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

On Monday 23 April, the team gave a presentation at the Arctic Climate Change Youth Forum (ACCYF), a Schools on Board outreach event held at Lower Canada College in Montreal. A panel of circumpolar representatives (Fig. 2) shared background information and answered questions from high school students about northern life (ACCYF, 2012; Baikie et al., 2012). Then two CYLP team members spoke at a political debate, sharing background information and concerns for the North (Kreuger and Gustafson, 2012).

At the IPY conference, the team presented two posters: one focused on the traditional knowledge projects (Grabowski et al., 2012), and the other synthesized the Circumpolar Young Leaders Program itself (Gerrard, 2012).



FIG. 2. ACCYF Panel Session (Alex Kellner, Meagan Grabowski, Kelsi Ivanoff, Dorothy Bootle, Caitlin Baikie). CYLP team members shared their northern economic development experiences with Montreal high school students.



FIG. 3. Ivalu Rosing speaks at IPY 2012 Indigenous Knowledge Exchange on Youth Capacity.

On Wednesday 24 April, CYLP representatives with other students from Nunavut Sivuniksavut participated in a presentation at an indigenous knowledge exchange session (Fig. 3) (Kolson et al., 2012). Attendees at the conference from all disciplines had the opportunity to ask questions. On Thursday 25 April, James Kuptana, the CYLP team leader, spoke at a summary session, bringing forward the voice of Inuvialuit communities and emphasizing the importance of an Arctic university in Canada (Kuptana, 2012).

The opportunity to share with southern high school students and then attendees of the IPY conference was an invaluable and empowering experience. Too often the Arctic is spoken of as a place of things: resources, ice, or flora and fauna. In reality it should be spoken of as a place of people: people who are intimately connected with the resources, ice, flora and fauna. Most northern communities may be small, but they deserve a big voice into what

happens in their lands. The presence of the Circumpolar Young Leaders group at the IPY conference brought that voice.

## COMMON GROUND

In addition to the sharing with outsiders, the interpersonal sharing that happened within the team was a momentous force. Despite being from different places in the world, different language groups, or different cultures, all team members had these ideas in common:

1. With constant change, it can be hard to find your identity as a northern youth. There are many reasons a Northerner may need to leave home, especially to attend southern educational institutions to obtain a degree. Some young Northerners travel across the world to learn about the Arctic they are from. What do they lose by leaving their home culture: hunting skills, the chance to learn from their parents and grandparents, language? From a northern youth perspective, establishing a post-secondary institution accessible from our northern homes is essential to maintaining our existing base of knowledge and skills.
2. The costs of natural resource development are high. Each team member's home was in a different state of development or remediation. When we shared stories about these issues, we realized the risks are inherent, whether they are oil spills, open-pit mines disrupting wildlife habitat, or toxic residues infiltrating entire watersheds. The trade-offs involve economic gains and employment, but overall we agreed that there are not enough long term-minded decisions when it comes to natural resource development. Communities should have the power to say no to development, and when development does occur, more discussion is needed to ensure honest collaboration and communication between parties.
3. The northern cultures are strong. Despite what colonialism has done in the Arctic, the people who live in the North are resilient. As Mary Simon told Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper after his apology to Aboriginal peoples for residential schools, Aboriginal peoples are not gone, they are present and strong (Parliament of Canada, 2008). Each young leader has a vision for his or her home, and they are pursuing those visions through further education, non-governmental organizations like Friends of the Finno-Ugric Peoples, learning about their legal rights by pursuing full understanding of land claims, or sharing their voices through art. Continued support of northern youth voices, through programs such as Circumpolar Young Leaders, is pivotal for a socially and ecologically sustainable Arctic.

## CONCLUSION

The assembly of the Circumpolar Young Leaders was a great success, and the support of this program is making a significant contribution to developing the confidence and leadership skills of the next generation that will represent the North. Finding solidarity with fellow youth on northern issues left an impression on each team member, as well as on the coordinators and the attendees of the ACCYF and IPY conferences (Simon, 2012). Current climate change and globalization made it the perfect time for circumpolar young leaders to meet and exchange ideas, and with these connections, move forward empowered and enlightened into the challenging decades ahead.

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