



Lessons from the hole in the Ozone

Concern about global warming, the slow accumulative poisoning of the Arctic food chain, the dumping, especially off the Kola Peninsula of Russian submarine reactors and other nuclear wastes, water and airborne pollutants and the mess left by military and industrial sites throughout the Circumpolar region, has put environmental protection near the top of everyone's "Arctic" agenda. Even Russia, beset with the enormous post-Soviet problems of building both a democracy and rebuilding a shattered economy, has promoted environmental issues. Boris Yeltsin once told Audrey McLaughlin that he too was worried about nuclear dumping off the Kola and suggested she ask Ottawa to pay for the clean-up.

The Arctic Council, itself an outgrowth of the AEPS (the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy), can expect to have environmental issues high on its agenda.

Because many of the pollutants that invade the Circumpolar region originate elsewhere, no solution will be possible without broad international support, even if all eight Arctic Council members could reach accord on the need for specific measures.

Which is why environmental degradation in the Arctic is unlikely to prompt broad international action unless, and until, it can be demonstrated that the consequences are both sufficiently dire and will affect populations far outside the Arctic.

It wasn't worry about Antarctic penguins that made repairing the hole in the Ozone possible. It was the fear of skin cancer, shared by hundreds of millions of sun lovers across the United States and the rest of the industrialized world, that provided the international political impetus to tackle the causes.

In the Arctic, where environmental problems are localized, the solutions are unlikely to require multilateral intervention. But where they are sourced beyond the Arctic, the newly-formed Arctic Council may not offer sufficient scope for solutions.

Sustainable Development

This should be easy. After all, the alternative ultimately leads to the exhaustion of the planet's resources, and presumably the end of human civilization.

Yet nothing on the Northern agenda seems more problematic. First and foremost, there is no agreement on what sustainable development means.

Does it include large-scale hydrocarbon projects, or only if the proceeds are somehow ploughed back into the region? On what basis are extractive industries acceptable?

For some sustainable development is a red flag. Among some corporate interests, it is seen as an impossible and irresponsible crusade, that will ruin them.

For many aboriginal peoples, sustainable development has been a central tenet of their lives and cultures for tens of thousands of years. Unsustainable development, therefore, is a direct threat to their very existence as peoples.

Developing any strategy where sustainable development is promoted within Canada's North, let alone projecting it as a element of Circumpolar foreign policy, remains in its infancy.

Not least the difficulty is in definition.

For instance, the impressive report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, which devotes