

Exploring Common Solutions for the Arctic Environment

IASSA Statement Prepared for the 2018 Arctic Environment Ministers' Meeting

The International Arctic Social Sciences Association (IASSA) brings together over 700 social science and humanities scholars who work in the Arctic. This includes experts in anthropology, human geography, sociology, economics, political science, linguistics, history, health and archeology, among others. Social science research has important contribution to understanding complex processes of environmental change in the Arctic. The nature of social-ecological systems is such that changes in the natural environment cannot be examined and understood in isolation from social dynamics in Arctic communities. Humans and social systems are critically important at both ends of the environmental change process: they are often a driving force behind it and, at the same time, the main recipient of its impacts. Similarly, nature conservation in the Arctic is not attainable without engaging Indigenous peoples and local residents as researchers, stewards and stakeholders.

Arctic residents, most particularly the Indigenous peoples, have a special relationship and unique, grounded in generational experiences, understandings of Arctic environment. Indigenous knowledge is a separate, inherently self-sustaining knowledge system with its own methodologies and validation processes that is key to accurate and holistic interpretation of natural systems dynamics. Arctic residents and communities hold an important place in environmental research and policymaking. Engaging social sciences and Indigenous knowledge is a good practice that allows developing evidence-based Arctic environmental policies.

IASSA and its members have been active participants of key Arctic Council initiatives focused on examining environmental change, vulnerability, resilience and adaptation in the context coupled human-natural systems. This includes Arctic Resilience Action Framework, Arctic Resilience Report, Arctic Human Development Report, Adaptation Actions for a Changing Arctic, Arctic Social Indicators, and others. We hope for further cooperation across disciplines and Arctic Council working groups to ensure that social science expertise, as well as Indigenous knowledge are fully incorporated.

Environmental policy and research play critical role in improving wellbeing of Arctic communities while preserving ecosystems. Social implications of resource based activities, whether extractive industries or renewable energy projects, is an important element of planning needed to ensure sustainable development in the Arctic. As an observer, IASSA is committed to supporting this and other fields of applied environmental work at the Arctic Council through our multidisciplinary expertise. Scio-economic impact assessment and benefit sharing principles are priority research areas for Arctic social scientists. IASSA members strive to develop methodologies for assessing human wellbeing, measuring socio-economic impacts of resource activity and creating Arctic-based indicators of sustainable development.

To ascertain the UN sustainable development goals in the Arctic, more interdisciplinary, international research is needed in the forthcoming years to understand, predict and prepare for environmental change. Arctic countries are well positioned to accomplish this task by supporting the work of the Arctic Council, its working and expert groups, with its emphasis on environment, human wellbeing and sustainability. Conclusion of the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation is an important step towards this success.