

Climate Change: The Cultural Cost

Tanyella Allison

Scientists and economists have finally put a price tag on climate change. According to the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the cost of keeping the global temperature rise to between 2.0-2.8°C is predicted to be less than 3% of global GDP (1) - although how the money is to be used and whether this target is enough to prevent catastrophic damage is still much debated (2). Yet in encountering a community where climate change is on the doorstep now, transforming the face of the world its inhabitants have experienced for centuries, one cannot help but ask instead: what is the cultural cost of climate change?

The pace of climate change in Greenland now would not have been believed ten years ago. Eric Rignot, a scientist with NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, has measured a "doubling in ice loss from Greenland over the past decade", and recent findings show that Greenland's gravity has weakened, the glaciers shedding ice at a rate above the leisurely 1000-2000 years predicted in computer models (3). There is much debate over the effects of the Arctic melt: rising sea levels, shifts in ocean currents, the loss of many endangered species are all predicted, albeit with a high margin of error.



Yet cultural upheaval is even more difficult to measure. Nevertheless, whilst the issues are complex, it is possible to imagine that with the loss of endangered species such as whales and polar bears, hunting practices that support not only the diet, but also the traditions and identity of the majority Inuit population, may be severely disrupted. Furthermore, the weight of Greenland's ice sheet has created a huge basin, much of it below sea level, and some Arctic researchers suggest that as the ice melts and the ice sheet retreats, the ocean will rush in after it (4). It is likely this would have a huge impact on local close-knit communities in terms of flooding and migration.

However, for the locals of Qaqortoq, a small village in south Greenland, the effects of climate change are felt now: the palpably warmer temperatures and the retreat of the Arctic ice cuts at the peace and tranquillity that the frozen landscape affords them. Whilst scientific speculation about the potential effects of climate change abounds, for some, the transformation of the Arctic cannot be stated or predicted in material terms. "We are more of a spiritual people", explains Louisa Thomassie, a Greenlander who educates the many scientists working in the Arctic about traditional Inuit knowledge in order to improve relations (5). Indeed, improving relations with one another and with the earth we live upon should certainly be high up on any global 'To Do' list, and Inuit culture, with its emphasis on the interconnectedness of human and natural systems, may just have a few lessons for humanity.

Yet this is not a lament of the loss of a pristine, bounded culture that is bearing the brunt of climate change far from the centres of industrialisation. In Qaqortoq, not dissimilar to many other villages, subsistence hunting is intermingled with consumerism, and the local fur industry is linked into the global market - supplying skins to China and London. However, with the erosion of the Arctic Ice comes the erosion of the rich and varied culture that has been supported by this unique environment, and the knowledge and understanding that has developed in one of the most barren and beautiful locations on earth. Whether it be 3% of global GDP, or a more considerable percentage (as suggested in *The Guardian* (6) after the IPCC released its report), if there is a sum that could slow or prevent climate change, it is time we realise the enormity of what we are set to lose, and bite the bullet.

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References:

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2. Giving Up On Two Degrees. Published in *The Guardian*. <http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2007/05/01/1058/>. 1st May, 2007.
3. The Big Thaw. *National Geographic*. June, 2007.
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6. 'Giving Up On Two Degrees'. Ibid.



Science of the Skies: What the Government Needs to Know in the Fight Against Climate Change

Dr Victoria Pope, Head of Climate Change for Government, MET Office

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events@camtriplehelix.co.uk

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