Miljøorganisationer bliver ikke taget seriøst i Arktis

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Environmental non-governmental organizations struggle to be taken seriously in the Arctic:

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Many environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) are interested in the North. In Greenland, ENGOs struggle to be taken seriously. One reason that contributes to the ENGO struggle is their lack of local representation.

ENGOs and local representation

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are non-profit organizations that focus on various social and political issues. ENGOs are a subgroup of NGOs which focus on environmental dimensions of social and political issues. In the context of this article, local representation means representation by ENGOs in the geographical area they want to influence, such as Greenland.

Local Representation in action

Throughout the North, international ENGOs have had a mixed reception, particularly with indigenous peoples. ENGOs have made a name for themselves in international politics for representing minority groups. ENGOs, however, have been seen by some locals as prioritizing their interests and values at the expense of local interests and needs.

As one representative of indigenous peoples to the Arctic Council noted:

[ENGOs] are trying to impose their values on us and we are here to tell them no. And we have been fairly successful, particularly as until climate change, they didn’t want to be where we are anyway.¹

¹ Interview conducted by Danita Catherine Burke with Arctic Council permanent participant representative, 25 May 2016
Indigenous peoples can represent themselves and are empowered by gaining legal and political powers. As a result, ENGOs need to rethink how they try to include themselves in regional issues.

A major issue ENGOs face in trying to redefine their role in northern environmental issues is access to people in the region who can help them implement change. As one ENGO representative noted: “To be taken seriously you need to be here. Otherwise you’re just an outsider.”

In Greenland, very few ENGOs are consistently represented. Research for this article revealed two international ENGOs with permanent representation in Greenland: the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Oceans North.

Other ENGOs, however, are keen to be involved in Greenlandic governance of their environment but lack a local presence. Greenpeace is a prime example.

There is a perception in Greenland that Greenpeace is very slow to learn from its past mistakes in the North. In 2010 Greenpeace protested against the Cairn Energy exploration for offshore oil in Greenland by illegally occupying the rig. Greenpeace’s approach was seen as trying to undermine the local economy by prioritizing its international agenda over Greenlandic efforts to be self-sustaining and gain independence.

Some feel that Greenpeace’s lack of local representation and network contributed to executives in the organization being ill-informed about how its campaign strategy would undermine its local reputation. As a result, Greenpeace undermined the work it had done in the 2000s to repair its reputation in Greenland from the fallout of the seal industry collapse in the 1960s-1980s.

The WWF, however, has had much more successful in Greenland, as well as in Alaska (USA), Russia and Canada with its Polar Bear Patrol program. Its strategy is quite different from Greenpeace. WWF often has permanent local representation and these representatives work to build local networks and work with local stakeholders, such as community governments.

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2 Interview conducted by Danita Catherine Burke with ENGO representative, 28 April 2018.
The Polar Bear Patrol program “model is successfully reducing the number of conflicts between people and polar bears.”  

WWF provides funding to help communities reduce instances of conflict between polar bears and communities, including hiring guards to patrol communities and scare away bears.

This means environmental protection and jobs at the same time.

Overall, there are multiple ways to approach northern environmental issues. As ENGOs are learning, however, investing in local representation can play a large part in the success of an initiative and inform successful campaign strategies.

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4 http://www.wwf.ca/newsroom/?20161/Polar-bear-patrols-keep-bears-and-Arctic-communities-safe