

8. Impacts of human activity and development of a regime

For a greater part of its history Svalbard has been a ‘resource frontier’ – a remote, isolated area that was exploited for its natural resources by people coming from the south on a seasonal basis. In the modern period Svalbard can be compared to a colony. Due to the constraints of the environment Svalbard is not well suited for extensive land use. Does that mean impacts of human activity have been few and low?

An impact can be defined as an (observable) effect on or change in the environment caused by activity or processes. Both human and natural processes cause impacts; is the one worse than the other from an ethical perspective? It all depends on how nature is perceived and valued – as cultural landscapes or unspoiled wilderness.

Historically, human harvesting of Svalbard’s resources has caused severe impacts on the environment, for example:

- Walrus were hunted since the early 17th century, almost to extinction.
- The North Atlantic stock of Bowhead (Greenland) whale was seriously depleted by the intensified hunt ca. 1650–1800.
- Modern whaling 1903–12 killed some 2,000 Blue and Finner whales. Whales have until recent years been scarce in the area, except Beluga and Minke, which were never caught in huge quantities.
- Local seal catches (Harp, Bearded and Ringed seals) were limited and sustainable.
- Russian (Pomor) hunting and trapping, and later Norwegian activity suffered declining productivity. Around 1900 geese, eider duck, fox, polar bear, reindeer and walrus were threatened – not least by summer expeditions and trophy hunting.
- The local Arctic char has been overexploited by locals and visitors over time; clam trawling in the 1980s had to be stopped after only a few years.

Although settlements are few and small, the number of people has grown since the 1980s – particularly the number of visitors. Living standards have risen; mobility has increased, causing a greater load on the environment. The present two coalmines – Longyearbyen and Barentsburg – are rapidly being emptied, and it is not likely that new mines will be opened and in that way result in greater land use.

Svalbard was a no man’s land for 300 years and suffered from the infamous “tragedy of the commons”. The Svalbard Treaty of 1920 secures equal opportunities to exploit resources, but also contains paragraphs about conservation of nature (art. 2). Environmental regulation was, however, slow in coming. Reindeer were totally protected in 1925, walrus in 1952, geese in 1955 and eider duck in 1963. Two plant reserves were established in the 1930s. Some regulations of hunting and trapping were introduced in 1955, and a quota system for polar bear hunting came in 1970. Polar bears were internationally protected in 1972.

The real break-through of environmental regulation came in 1973, when 3 large natural parks, 2 big nature reserves and 15 bird sanctuaries were established – not without protest. Initially, the petroleum claims within the protected areas were exempt from regulation but all were gradually included, a process which was concluded in the 1990s. With the enforcement of the modern Svalbard Environment Law in 2002 the basis for effective regulation seems in place. At the present, some two thirds of the land area and most of the territorial waters (12 Nm) are protected as parks or reserves with strict regulations.

When Norway assumed sovereignty over Svalbard in 1925, the question of local governance had to be solved. The central political authorities found it neither desirable nor necessary to establish an extensive local administration. Instead, the office of a ‘sysselmann’ (now the gender-neutral term ‘sysselmester’) was introduced. The sysselmann incorporated the functions of police as well as civil administration and government representative. It was

not until 1935 that the sysselmann resided permanently in Longyearbyen, and as late as the 1960s the office consisted of only 3-4 persons. The expansion of the office started in the 1970s because of a more active Norwegian Svalbard policy manifested by the environmental regulations, the opening of the airport and modernization of the local community. Today, Sysselimesteren på Svalbard has a large staff and big resources at his disposal, including a modern service vessel and two SAR helicopters.

Local democracy was practically non-existent in the 'company town'. In Longyearbyen, the democratically elected Svalbard Council (Svalbardsrådet) was established in 1971, but it did not get decisive influence on local development. The real power rested with either the coal company Store Norske or central government in Oslo. During the 1990s there was a growing discontent with the lack of self-determination and, finally, in 2002 local democracy was introduced in the shape of Longyearbyen lokalstyre, which in many ways resembles a municipality administration on the mainland. Its authority is, however, restricted to Longyearbyen. A similar system does not exist in the other settlements on Svalbard, Barentsburg and Ny-Ålesund. Outside Longyearbyen it is still Norwegian central government, represented locally by the Sysselimester (Governor), that exerts authority.

Food for thought

- Has resource exploitation on Svalbard been sustainable at all? Examples of such?
- Apart from protecting the environment – what other motives may the establishment of national parks and nature reserves in 1973 have had?
- Why, do you think, is not all of Svalbard governed by local democratic bodies?