

Changing Arctics—the Tourist Gaze

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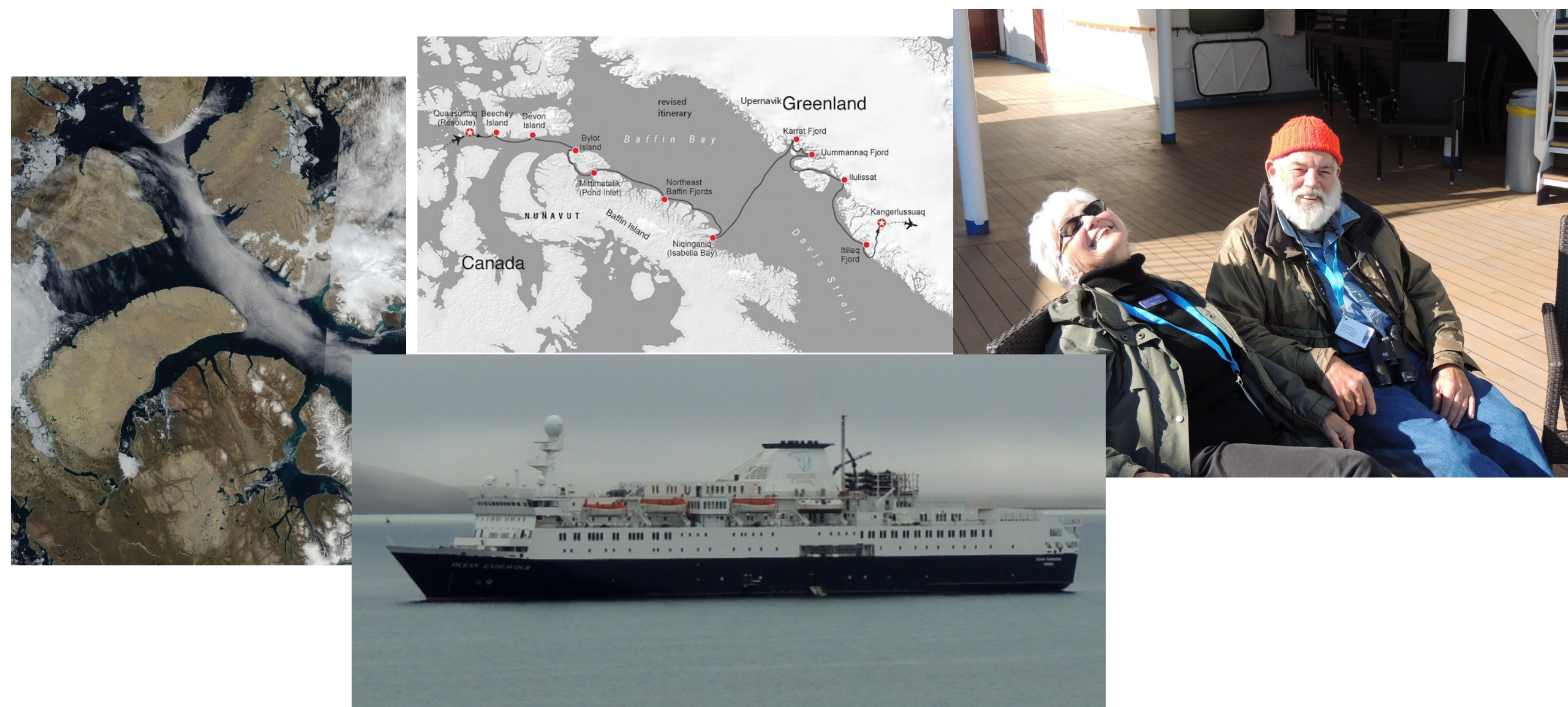
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Clear and Fair Sailing

As preparation for research in Arctic regions, we signed up for a commercial tourist expedition with the company Adventure Canada, August 8-21, 2015. The trip reinforced and deepened our knowledge about the high Arctic, which was otherwise based on reading, the media, and our imaginations. We here present a verbal and graphic outline of the trip, with particular emphasis on what we saw, experienced and learned about climate change in the Eastern Canadian Arctic and the northwestern Greenland Arctic. We title this “Changing Arctics,” using the plural to indicate the importance of focusing on particular places and systems of the far north rather than depicting “the Arctic” as a whole.

The first fact was the happy—and sad—fact of a very warm summer and little sea ice in the eastern Canadian Arctic in the province of Nunavut. A few days before our trip we found an unusually clear satellite image of the Canadian part of our voyage, from Resolute east along Devon Island and then across to northern Baffin Island and Pond Inlet. Our planned passage as far as Pond Inlet would be clear of sea ice!

We had clear and fair sailing, at times basking in sunlight, temperatures hovering around freezing., and we were able to travel in Zodiacs to land sites all but 2 days of the 13 day trip. We joined the *Ocean Endeavour* expedition ship at Resolute (74°41'51"N.). At first we visited Beechey Island, the gravesite of three of the unfortunate Franklin Expedition (1846) sailors, and other places along the desolate “polar desert” of Devon Island, said to be the largest uninhabited island on earth. We crossed Lancaster Sound to Bylot Island, northern Baffin Island—seeing only one iceberg and no sea ice. We by-passed Pond Inlet because of high winds and cut short the plan to travel along eastern Baffin Island due to the fact that there WAS sea ice, just too much in the wrong places, making our voyage there impossible and somewhat exciting. We crossed Baffin Bay to Greenland earlier than planned.



Elusive Large Charismatic Fauna....

The lack of sea ice in the region made wildlife sightings distant and scarce. Where are the polar bears? We saw a few on the shores and hillsides of northern Baffin Island, rapidly scampering up and away, and we saw a couple of bears swimming in the water, surprised by our ship. Granted, the Adventure Canada crew was determined to keep us away from close contact with polar bears, to protect us, but there was no question that the lack of sea ice reduced the chances of seeing bears, seals, and narwhals. This could lead tourists to believe that they are indeed disappearing, victims of climate change in the Arctic, and that may be so, but biologists on the trip warned us that the polar bears constitute a sizeable population in the eastern Canadian Arctic.

Polar bears depend on sea ice as a platform for hunting seals, which are their major source of stored energy (fat), and they are in trouble in other regions. In the northern Canadian Arctic Islands and northern Greenland, the areas of our voyage, they have a better chance than in the more southerly subpopulations such as those in Hudson Bay or the southern Beaufort Sea as well as in the Chukchi and Barents seas.

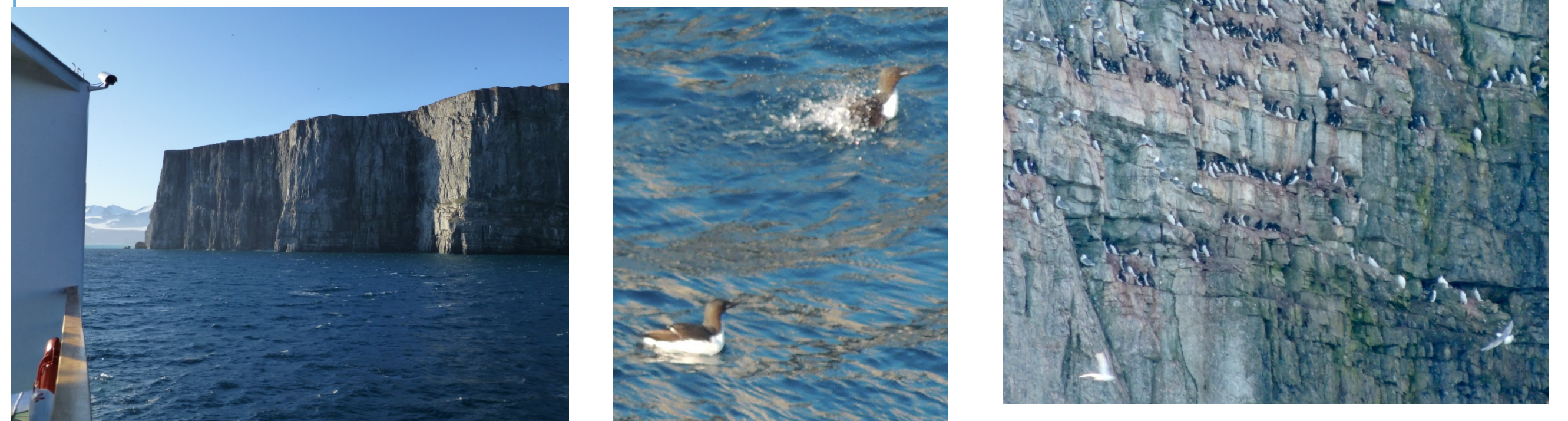


Seabird Challenges

The most dramatic story of ecological dimensions of climate change in the Canadian arctic came from our visit to Cape Hay, on the northern edge of Bylot Island, northern Baffin Island, and what we learned from biologist Stephen Smith, one of the Arctic experts on the voyage. The steep cliffs of southern Lancaster Sound host nesting murres, kittiwakes, gulls, and other species that arrive around the time the ocean warms in early summer to birth and nurse their young. Thick-billed murres grabbed our attention in part because we know them (as “turrs”) from Newfoundland where they are hunted for food in the fall and winter months. Here they lay and care for their eggs and chicks on narrow ledges.

More on seabirds

Thick-billed murre chicks fledge in August. They jump off the steep cliffs into the water where they somehow manage to join up with their fathers (!) to begin a 2500 mile or longer swim to waters off Newfoundland where they spend the winter. The climate change problem is, again, lack of sea ice. Arctic cod are small forage fish that depend on sea ice. The early summer breakup of ice allows murres to catch Arctic cod along the edges of the ice to feed their chicks. But too often now the chicks hatch out after the sea ice has disappeared, and their parents bring back other fish, especially capelin, which are far leaner and less nutritious. What can the murres do? Can they move north following the ice and Arctic cod? There are few steep cliffs to the north, reducing their options.



And then there is Greenland

We sailed across Baffin Bay to the northwest coast of Greenland. There we visited several fishing villages (Upernavik, Uummannaq, Illulisat) and places along Karras Fjord, the complex of islands leading to Disko Bay and Illulisat (a World Heritage site), and the fjords leading to Kangerlussuaq, our point of departure back to Toronto. Once we arrived on Greenland’s coast we saw lots of ice. Indeed everyone on the ship became camera happy as our ship wove in and out among the huge icebergs, some larger than our ship, that are spawned from fast-moving glaciers and ice rivers.

The people of the villages visited are mainly Greenland Inuit and rely heavily on seals, fish, whales, narwhals, seabirds, polar bears, and musk ox for food and income. They are definitely experiencing the effects of climate change, for example in the greater dangers faced now in crossing the ice on dog-sled or snowmobile. On the other hand, those we saw in the Disko Bay region appeared fully engaged in sealing and fishing, at home in the summer’s ice-fields, and from our later reading we learned more about their resilience and adaptability in the face of profound changes. They are less victims than active problem-solvers.



Multiple Polar Bear Populations...and Arctics... and Inuit

A general lesson is to avoid drawing conclusions about polar bears as a species from a single population—or from a single tourist experience. For example, for some polar bear populations, the loss of thick old ice replaced by annual thinner ice can mean having higher productivity. The same should be said about “the Arctic,” for it too is highly diverse, with regional and local differences in the effects of climate change. Finally, the same general lesson applies to the peoples of the Arctic, the Inuit. All around the polar regions, the native people are closely related in race, language, and culture, but there are many distinctions in dialect, health, and culture that should make us pause before casting “the Inuit” as “victims of climate change.” Different Inuit groups have different and various experiences and ways of coping with environmental change. We need to respect the fine-grained details of difference, as well as similarity, even in something as big as global change.

Acknowledgements and Further Reading

Thanks to the staff of Adventure Canada (adventurecanada.com) and the Captain and crew of the Ocean Endeavour for a great expedition, worthy of university credits!

Further Reading:

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