

2015 conference of the European Society for Ecological Economics (ESEE)

University of Leeds, UK, 30 June - 3 July 2015.

Proposal for special session for ESEE 2015:

“Ecosystem services and natural resources of the north – sustainability, values and trade-offs”

Summary abstract:

In the Arctic a pattern similar to that in other places in the world is developing: a remote area, sparsely populated, with lucrative underground resources; and nation states assuming that development of those resources is also in the interest of the local population. No one knows what the long term consequences of different courses of action are. Next to knowing more about the ‘hardware’ of the Arctic like fossil fuel prospecting we also need to know more about the ‘software’ that is governing the choices in this difficult debate. What are the underlying norms in the institutional frameworks used in the Arctic? For this analysis we develop a framework based on the literature regarding the ethics of sustainable resource use. Based on the framework a set of codes is developed with which formal documents are analysed on the use of criteria from different discourses.

Abstract:

Underlying norms and ethics regarding sustainable use and distribution of resources in the Arctic.

For a long time, the Arctic has been protected by its harsh climate. Four million people live in it, with an economy that relies heavily on resource extraction. Now that the sea ice promises to melt away in the summertime within a few decades, the interest in developing more Arctic resources is growing. A pattern similar to that in other places in the world is developing: a remote area, sparsely populated, with underground resources like fossil fuel and metal ore; nation states assuming that development of those resources is also in the interest of the local population; multinational companies pledging to operate sustainably; a local population that partly yields and partly resists. The danger in the Arctic is that no one really knows what the long term consequences of different courses of action are, and that we will know it only when it is too late.

Next to knowing more about the ‘hardware’ of the Arctic (like fossil fuel prospecting, sustainable technology, income generated and pollution caused) we also need to know more about the ‘software’ that is governing the choices in this difficult debate. What are the underlying norms in the legal frameworks and policy documents that apply to the Arctic? What does Corporate Social Responsibility imply and what are the moral rules of the peoples of the Arctic? Where do these different ethics overlap or contradict each other?

For this analysis we first develop a framework based on the literature regarding the ethics of sustainable resource use. We used the literatures on global ethics, environmental ethics and ecological economics. In the framework we create a palette of criteria from different discourses. Firstly there is the discourse of economics, with economic growth as its main criterion of a well-functioning society. Other criteria are efficient resource allocation, sufficient capital investment, and equitable distribution of household income. Then there is the discourse on sustainability that takes a central role because it aims to integrate economic, social and ecological interests. It includes economic growth, but also proposes criteria like fairness, wellbeing and reduction of environmental damages. Finally there is ecological economics that sees the economy as a subset of the global ecological system. From this viewpoint, the integrity of the biosphere is paramount, and the criteria are protection of biodiversity, elimination of environmental pollution and resource use within ecological limits.

These schools are not necessarily compatible, but we use it as a kind of scale to map out the positions of different Arctic stakeholders. We are also interested in the dimension of values at the individual versus the collective level. We see the household level still as the individual level. The collective level can again be divided in a community of only people and a community that also includes other living beings. Based

on the framework a set of codes is developed with which formal documents can be analysed on the use of criteria from different discourses.

We collected a set of publicly available Arctic strategies, treaties, declarations and other formally approved documents. A balance is sought between documents from international law; national governments; documents from the private sector, and documents from indigenous and/or local communities. These documents are analysed with the code set through Atlas-ti software.

A first outline of the results is that all texts mention all three aspects of sustainability: economic, social and environmental aspects. Text from the private sector seems to pay more attention to social aspects than to economic or environmental aspects. Text from governments is balanced to all three aspects. Text from indigenous groups is also mostly about social aspects such as learning and culture, but also contains the more strict interpretations of ecological economics concerning the ecosystem. Indigenous text also mentions economic aims. These are only generalities but we also present an inventory of more specific content of different documents.

Preliminary conclusions are that the sustainability discourse pervades all formal documents. This does not mean that stakeholders agree on the priorities. Furthermore, the position from ecological economics, that integrity of the biosphere should have priority over economic growth seems to be shared by very few of the stakeholders.