

The connection between me and a receding glacier

An Arctic trip let me tie together some loose ends, such as climate change and a disappearing way of life, one that's far away from mine.

By LEAH KASINSKY

Globe and Mail - Tuesday, October 11, 2005 Posted at 11:46 AM EDT

I have recently returned from a youth expedition in the Arctic aimed at investigating climate change and its environmental and societal impacts.

This two-week momentous expedition was organized by Students on Ice, an organization that aims to unite young minds with scientific, educational, and political experts. It brings them to either poles of the earth in order to forge a respect for these isolated environments as well as to instill values of proper stewardship of this land. Our team of 106 members travelled from Iceland to Greenland, and ended at Baffin Island.

I stood atop the Snaefellsness glacier in Iceland. Having battled seasickness the night before, we climbed upward wondering when and if we would reach glacial territory. And suddenly, as if summoned by our doubt, the clouds parted to reveal us halfway into the glacier, surrounded only by blue sky and a white blanket of clouds below us. If you stopped to listen, you could hear the wind hit the snow. Or the sound of a glacier melting and receding under the impact of the sun and the warming atmosphere.

Four days into our Arctic journey I tied two loose ends together and climate change and mass global pollution morphed from an intangible set of statistics, or a worrisome article in the newspaper, to the reality of a glacier receding under my feet.

It happened while we were racing through the milky teal waters of an uncharted fjord in Greenland, toward one of the fastest receding glaciers in the world, and watching icebergs cave off it into the water bellow.

It also happened while listening to Shelia Watt-Cloutier, the global Inuit spokesperson and head of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, speak about the dramatic change she has witnessed in her lifetime.

She talked about how the Inuit are changing from a semi-nomadic people living off the land to a sedentary village people, whose elders' knowledge of their environment is losing relevance due to the unpredictability of the ice with our warming climate. Perhaps most tragically, Inuit mothers fear to breastfeed their children due to the large amounts of pollutants -- like the pesticides we spray on our lawns -- that work their way up into the arctic food chain and into these mothers' breast milk. The

amount of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and mercury found in their breast milk have been reported at toxic levels, far higher than those in polluting metropolitan cities like Los Angeles.

The reality of my unconsciously consuming life on the 49th parallel, polluting, warming and changing life above the 60th, hit home again and again.

And my conscience screamed out at the injustice of a world where those who had the largest hand in creating the problems are not those who pay the price for it; where our green lawns rob women of the basic right to breastfeed their children; where polar bears are threatened with extinction because their hunting grounds are melting away. That vast, cold land of sea and sky, whose oceans team with life, is threatened by being changed forever.

In the ocean between Iceland and Greenland, our boat glided beside a blue whale mother and calf, at times less than 30 metres away. With the mirror-like water stretching to the horizon in every direction, cut only by this giant, gentle animal beside me, surfacing in unison with its young, a ball caught in my throat and I asked myself, who are we to change this landscape?

I returned from the journey, bustling from the airport through scorching and screaming rush-hour traffic in 33-degree Vancouver, wishing that each lone person in a car that I pass could have the same eye-opening experience as myself.

I don't want to be an environmentalist who screams apocalyptic messages: messages of tropical disease spreading north with the heat; of drought leading to famine leading to war; of rising sea levels destroying low-altitude countries like Bangladesh. I don't want to do that because I see a lot of hope and opportunity in the impact of the vote we cast in the details of our daily lives.

For myself, it starts with consciousness of my actions and their implications, whether it be turning off the lights every time I leave the room, buying local organic produce at a farmers' market so it doesn't have to travel halfway around the world, buying second-hand clothes, or riding my bike. And as I grow up, my consciousness of the rift between ourselves and our environment will affect my decisions on where I work, how I vote and what I dedicate my time and energy and life to.

Our changes need to start today. And not just on an international stage with the Kyoto protocol. It needs to start from within, with each individual recognizing the impact of daily decisions on the world as a whole.

Inactivity, indecisiveness, and ignorance are choices. There is no specific enemy here; we are interconnected as a species and a planet and all in this boat together. Today I don't simply want change, I am the change I want to see in the world.

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