Arctic at the Crossroads

As a small team of youth ambassadors for Greenpeace’s Arctic campaign begin their trek to the North Pole, I'm reminded of the campaign to save the Antarctic (video), which I led on behalf of Greenpeace in the 1980s.

While politics between the two poles are literally polar opposites, campaigning to protect these last frontiers from unbridled exploitation have much in common. The Arctic, like the Antarctic 25 years ago, is at a crossroads.

Flash back to 1988: Bureaucrats and lawyers from two dozen countries had just popped the champagne corks following more than five years of tough negotiations, adopting a convention that paved the way for multinational corporations to dig, drill, and inevitably destroy the last (relatively) pristine continent on Earth.

Not that they would have admitted it -- there were all sorts of "safeguards" aimed at preventing the kind of damage caused by oil development elsewhere. But when the Exxon Valdez ran aground in Alaska in March, 1989, spilling somewhere between 10 and 30 million gallons of oil and devastating local wildlife, the jig was up.

Within a few short months, the Antarctic mining consensus was on the verge of collapse. Unlike the negotiations, which took place in the rarefied atmosphere of closed-door proceedings, ratification of the convention was a matter for parliaments. And parliaments, of course, are open to public scrutiny. After years of high profile campaigning by Greenpeace and the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, the public wasn't having any of it.

At the October 1989 Antarctic Treaty meeting, the mood was tense and countries were divided. Several favoured scrapping the minerals convention and replacing it with a comprehensive environmental protection protocol. Most, however, weren't there yet. As I said, the Antarctic was at a crossroads, and as the meeting began, we released a powerful statement titled precisely that. It read (in part):

In 1989, Antarctica is a crossroads. We must choose between two paths; we cannot go both ways. Either Antarctica will become the last continent to be exploited of its mineral riches, or it will become the first to be protected, in perpetuity, for its wilderness values.

We face increasingly global threats to our environment -- such as the "greenhouse effect" and destruction of the Earth's protective ozone layer -- whose effects we can hope to stem but no longer to reverse. The issues at this meeting however concern a fragile, as yet exploited and relatively unpolluted region. This meeting gives us all, concerned citizens of an international community, a seminal opportunity to act firmly and in unison to prevent problems before they appear. We cannot afford to let this opportunity pass us by.

Fortunately, the leaders of the Antarctic Treaty states did have the wisdom not to let the opportunity pass them by. By 1991 they agreed to a 50-year moratorium on mining, ditched the minerals convention, and signed an Environment Protocol to the Antarctic Treaty.

Could the same sort of turnaround happen in the Arctic? That's a good question. Antarctica has no permanent residents and the region is governed by a Treaty whose decision-making bodies operate by consensus. Just two countries (France and Australia) changed their minds about the mining convention, and the whole house of cards collapsed. Those conditions don't apply in the Arctic.

But victory in Antarctica was never inevitable; the campaign was a long, hard slog. Antarctica was in no one's backyard, and when it came to mining there were no equivalent harpoons to get in front of, toxic discharge pipes to be plugged, or nuclear weapons tests to impede -- all Greenpeace stock in trade for raising public awareness. We were trying to prevent a disaster before it happened. We established a year-round base on Ross Island, and undertook gruelling annual expeditions to resupply it; Greenpeace was on site 24/7 for five years -- one never-ending, stress-inducing "direct action." I have the grey hair to prove it.
And to top it off, the very basis of our demands -- establishing "World Park Antarctica" -- was largely dismissed by the Antarctic policy elite as utopian, naïve, and unrealistic.

And so it was! Sometimes, though, being utopian, naïve and unrealistic is an advantage -- if capturing the public imagination is a key element of the strategy, it's far better to think big than to succumb to the "art of the possible." When Jacques Cousteau called on the French public to support the campaign in early 1989, within two months a million people signed a petition calling on the French government to pull out of the minerals negotiations. And by signing, I mean literally signing -- this was pre-internet and getting a million signatures in a single country in such a short period of time was a very, very big deal.

So here's my advice to Arctic campaigners.

The "greenhouse effect" -- a threat so novel in 1989 that we put it in quotes -- requires that we leave 80 percent of total fossil fuel reserves unburned. This isn't green hyperbole; even the International Energy Agency is sounding the alarm about this "carbon bubble." And let's not forget that 195 governments are legally bound by a Climate Convention designed to, "prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system." They have subsequently defined this to mean holding the increase in global temperature above pre-industrial levels below 2°C.

You can choose whether or not to communicate all of that to the public, but like Gandalf blocking the Balrog with his cry of "you shall not pass," you must take a principled stand -- one that will inspire hundreds of millions of people to stand with you.

To me, that is the central message that must be communicated. Oil spills like the Exxon Valdez make for powerful visual reminders, but at the end of the day even the cleanest, safest drilling operation (an oxymoron when it comes to the harsh polar environment) won't save the Arctic and it won't save us. If we don't figure that out, global warming will be our undoing in the end.

When asked at the time what I thought about "only" getting a 50-year moratorium on Antarctic mining, this was my answer: if in 50 years' time we haven't figured out that we can't afford to drill there, saving Antarctica will be the least of our problems.

A crossroads indeed.

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