



## The Arctic Circle Assembly: navigating the Arctic

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To cite this article: Emily Hague & Lauren McWhinnie (09 Nov 2023): The Arctic Circle Assembly: navigating the Arctic, The Polar Journal, DOI: [10.1080/2154896X.2023.2276569](https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2023.2276569)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2023.2276569>



Published online: 09 Nov 2023.



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CONFERENCE REPORT



## The Arctic Circle Assembly: navigating the Arctic

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The Arctic Circle Assembly convened for its 10th year at the Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Center in Reykjavík, Iceland. This Assembly marks the largest international gathering on the Arctic and was attended by more than 2000 participants from over 70 countries. This year more than 700 speakers participated, and these included heads of states and governments, ministers, members of parliaments, indigenous leaders and representatives, officials, experts, scientists, entrepreneurs, business leaders, environmentalists, students and activists from the international community of partners interested in the Arctic. The 2023 Assembly covered a multitude of topics, including geopolitical tensions affecting the Arctic, the green energy transition, exploitation of Arctic resources and future challenges in relation to protection of the Arctic environment and its peoples. It featured plenaries; academic, industry, and political sessions; as well as art shows and documentary screenings in the evenings.

Climate change, eloquently described as ‘global boiling’ rather than ‘global warming’ by the Icelandic President H.E. Katrín Jakobsdóttir during her plenary, was mentioned throughout the Assembly and was also keenly felt by all attendees, given the extreme weather event unfolding outside. The >50 knot bracing winds took its toll on attendance during the initial days of the Assembly, with many planes grounded and international travel on pause – the wind whipped seas also meant many of the boats moored outside the venue within Reykjavík’s ‘Old’ harbour remained decidedly harbour-bound. The maritime sector was also highly visible inside, playing a prominent role in Assembly discussions – with six sessions dedicated to, or heavily featuring, many different aspects of Arctic shipping. Speakers representing the coastguard, marine consultancy, shipping companies, maritime academics, and country ministers all spoke about both the current and future of shipping and maritime activities in the Arctic.

Despite indigenous communities potentially having to bear, in some cases, a significant burden in terms of increasing Arctic vessel activity (for example, with increases in cruise tourism or disturbance and potential displacement of marine mammal stocks), there was only one shipping-focused session that featured a representative voice for indigenous Arctic communities (Lisa Qiluqqi Koperqualuk, Vice Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council). The session ‘Arctic Shipping 2030’, led by the Clean Arctic Alliance, provided a platform to share

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perspectives on vessel impacts on Arctic wildlife, with discussions surrounding underwater noise, and the International Maritime Organisations' recent ambitious greenhouse gas emissions targets. Following a rich session, Jim Gamble (Pacific Environment) gave a rousing call to attendees to urgently address the pertinent issue of black carbon, an especially time-sensitive threat to the Arctic.

Issues related to the growing Arctic tourism industry arose in a number of sessions, with one session solely dedicated to a discussion surrounding the emerging impacts of cruise ship visits to remote communities, with specific case studies discussed on Norway, Iceland and Alaska (USA). Despite ongoing efforts for several years, to date, there appears to be little success and no clear path towards an effective solution to mitigate and manage the impacts of vessel-based tourism on small Arctic communities.

Green energy was a prominent theme throughout the Assembly, with the future requirements and associated challenges with regards greening of ports and vessels brought to the fore during a number of plenary and session talks, particularly at the 'Shipping Towards the Green Future' session. Whilst it is clear that work is underway to define the maritime sector's role and requirements in the green energy transition, how this will translate in an Arctic context remains unclear.

Whilst safety from an Arctic perspective was not at the forefront of the Assembly, safety at sea still remained a feature in multiple sessions, including an apprehension from multiple Arctic nations with regards Russia's recent allowance of a non-ice class vessel to traverse through Arctic waters. Whilst The International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) and The International Code of Safety for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code) are international regulations that provide ship-owners and operators legal requirements and guidance surrounding pollution prevention, there is cause for concern with regards the potential increasing transits of non-ice class vessels through Arctic waters that are particularly vulnerable to spill events. This is especially the case as many areas are remote from appropriate disaster response and search and rescue facilities.

The Russia–Ukraine war was at the forefront of many sessions and plenaries throughout the Assembly, with a session specifically dedicated to the 'Future of Arctic Shipping in the Era of Geopolitical Tensions and Regionalisation', which provided an opportunity to discuss how current political instabilities are impacting the maritime sector. Similarly, during a plenary from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's NATO's Chair of the Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer directly remarked on the security impacts on the Arctic considering the strengthening bond between Russia and China, and their joint interest in rapid commercial development of the Northern Sea Route. The rise in shipping volume along the Northern Sea Route featured throughout the three-day Assembly, with notable reservations relating to safety, environmental responsibility, and supporting infrastructure availability being raised on multiple occasions. Another session also addressed security in the Arctic region and highlighted the recent Israel–Palestine conflict and the potential for escalation which may affect the nearby Suez Canal, and consequently may affect other alternative shipping routes, including those via the Arctic.

The next Arctic Circle Assembly will take place at the same venue, 17–19 October 2024.

## Acknowledgments

Emily Hague's participation in the Assembly was supported by the Early Career Travel Grant of the Scottish Arctic Network, the Challenger Society for Marine Science, and the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme 'ePIncenter' project, under grant agreement No 861584. Lauren McWhinnie's participation was also supported by the EU ePIncenter project.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Horizon 2020 [ePIncenter Project: Grant Agreement ID 861584]; The Challenger Society for Marine Science; Scottish Arctic Network.

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