



Book review: *Arctic crashes: People and animals in the changing North*

Frigga Kruse

Institute for Ecosystem Research, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, Kiel, Germany

Correspondence: Frigga Kruse (fkruse@ecology.uni-kiel.de)

Published: 17 March 2023

Krupnik, I. and Crowell, A. L. (eds.): Arctic crashes: People and animals in the changing North, Smithsonian Scholarly Press, Washington, D.C., 555 pp., ISBN 978-1-944466-34-3, EUR 33.39, 2020.

Many of us wish that our doctoral thesis would achieve long-lasting and far-reaching relevance, though this is something few of us accomplish. The lifework of Danish zoologist Christian Vibe (1913–1998) on *Arctic animals in relation to climatic fluctuations* (Vibe, 1967) is more topical than ever and formed the basis of the study “Arctic People and Animal Crashes: Humans, Climate and Habitat Agency in the Anthropocene” (2014–2016) at the Smithsonian Institute. A key outcome of the study is the edited volume under review. *Arctic crashes: People and animals in the changing North* comprises 4 sections, 25 chapters, 35 contributors, and 555 pages – a summary will barely do the effort and the insights justice.

1 Crashes

The reader may be attracted to the title because they more or less have an idea of what “crashes” entail, which may even encompass the caribou on the front cover. It may also already reflect the topic as described by co-editor Igor Krupnik (chap. 1, Overview), which is the role of humans, climate, and habitat changes in historical collapses of some keystone Arctic wildlife species. The definition of crashes is by no means static. Rather, the contributors enliven the volume with their own approaches and applications. Douglas W. Veltre (chap. 20), for instance, proposes that Russian fur seal hunting in the Pribilof Islands was brought to an end not by a species crash per sé but by a profitability crash for

pelts. Brenda Parlee (chap. 12) stresses that the real crash may be the crisis of trust between different Arctic actors that should concern governments, scientists, and the public at large. Whatever the explanations by different actors over time, Krupnik underlines that every change is in fact *local*; each crash has its own roots and causes. The overarching goal of *Arctic crashes* is to weave diverse local or species-focused stories into a common narrative.

2 People

There are the people who are doing the writing, and there are the people who are being written about, all of whom matter because they embody or represent various aspects and philosophies of the edited volume. The contributors are advocates, anthropologists, archaeologists, biologists, community workers, curators, dental surgeons, ecologists, economists, elders, ethnographers, geographers, historians, museum directors and museologists, photographers, social scientists, sociologists, statisticians, storytellers, walrus hunters, wildlife managers, whaling captains, and zoologists. Some are at home in the Arctic; others are not. The diversity of the group is admirable, but it is of course the wide range of their experiences and knowledge that is purposeful. More varied still are their fields of interest that cover aDNA, community development, isogeochemical methods, repatriation, and value shifts, to name but a few. The people being written about commonly include past and present inhabitants of Inuit Nunaat, the Inuit homeland (e.g. Inuvialuit, Iñupiat, Kalaallit, Tlingit, Unangâ, and Yup'ik), as well as Vikings and commercially motivated people such as the aforementioned Russian sealers. Thus, the editors left no stone unturned to encourage the dialogue among social and natural scientists, wildlife historians, and indigenous experts in or-

der to tease out those local stories, some of which go back thousands of years.

3 Animals

The caribou that feature on the front cover are also the subject of several chapters. Other species include Atlantic cods, polar bears, harbour seals, harp seals, northern fur seals, Atlantic walrus, Maritimes walrus, Pacific walrus, bowhead whales, northern right whales, and narwhals. Biologists and ecologists may argue to what extent these are indeed keystone species. The reader must keep in mind, however, that the volume is about human–animal–environment interactions in the past, when these animals constituted the main stay of many indigenous peoples of Inuit Nunaat and also the principal income of companies. They were the keystone of many livelihoods, and their disappearance could cause great uncertainty and severe hardship.

4 The North

The map on the inside cover indicates the regional scope of *Arctic crashes*. In effect, it shows Inuit Nunaat, the Inuit homeland, as published on a map by the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC Alaska, 2017). The chapters span from the Chukchi Peninsula in the west across the whole of the Alaskan coast and northern Canada to the west and east coasts of Greenland. The Gulf of Alaska, the coast of Labrador, and Iceland also make it into the volume and onto the map, while the Maritime Provinces and the Gulf of St. Lawrence cling to its very edge. Furthermore, arrows indicate the off-map positions of Russia's Kuril Islands and Norway's Svalbard archipelago. As such, the case studies range from about 170° W to approximately 20° E, spanning 190° of the circum-Arctic. Studies from the North Pacific and the North Atlantic serve to put the volume into a global context and increase the comparative value.

5 Highlights

The case study of the bowhead extinction in Svalbard (chap. 24) is my own. The archipelago was uninhabited prior to the arrival of Barentsz in 1596, and Svalbard researchers do not usually meet with indigenous peoples. So I benefitted from the lessons of the indigenous partners, which Krupnik (chap. 1, Overview) pinpoints to be the value of alternative interpretation, which relies on observational, spiritual, and moral reasoning. In their Foreword, Pfeifer and Fox introduce the concept of *uumajuit* (“in their passing they gave us life”) and state that, as a sign of respect to animals, an Inuk would, for instance, never not hunt. Section II explores the cultural synergies between indigenous, historical, and management perspectives further. In an example of observational reasoning, the inhabitants of St. Lawrence Island know that

the walrus are healthy because they are eating them (Merlin Koonooka, chap. 9). The Iñupiat of North Alaska began to sell their masks on spiritual grounds: when they no longer caught whales, they could no longer hold their ceremonies (Amy Phillips-Chan, chap. 10). Adhering to a strict moral code, the Yup'ik residents of the lower Yukon River believe that improving the value we place on animals will lead to correct actions in their preservation (Ann Fienup-Riordan, chap. 7). Towards the end of the volume, Hunter T. Snyder (chap. 23) returns to the subject of value, probing whether the fragile existence of the once-common Atlantic cod today means that people value it too much or not enough!

6 Recommendations

Having made a tangential appearance in the volume, my aim of reviewing *Arctic crashes* was to assess the range of expertise, topics, and case studies, the underlying concepts and perspectives, and the methods used and insights gained. It is much clearer to me now which ideas and outlooks experts can share with each other to explain past and contemporary crashes and – as was the goal of the editors – to weave a common narrative. The volume offers a very solid base on which to model a similar investigation of the remaining 170° of the circum-Arctic, the Russian North. What the chapters themselves cannot provide, readers can undoubtedly find in the extensive 100-page, state-of-the-art bibliography. In closing, I concur with both Igor Krupnik (chap. 1) and George Hambrecht (chap. 6): through the ability to provide *local*, high-resolution examples of resilience, persistence, transformation, and collapse, archaeology and its complementary disciplines are taking their place as key *global-change* sciences.

Disclaimer. Publisher's note: Copernicus Publications remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Review statement. This paper was edited by Bernhard Diekmann.

References

- Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) Alaska: Basemap from the Atlas of Canada, Reference Map Series produced by Natural Resources Canada, 2008, <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2021/09/19-icc-0583-inuit-nunaat-map-2b-hpai-1-2-1536x1187.jpg> (last access: 3 March 2023), 2017.
- Vibe, C.: Arctic animals in relation to climatic fluctuations, C.A. Reitzel, Copenhagen, 227 pp., 1967.