

Conference Report of the 13th Polar Law Symposium Special Online Session

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The 13th Polar Law Symposium (PLS) special online session was held from November 9th to 30th 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it became the first symposium held online in the history of PLS. The PLS is an annual event and had been held in various countries such as Australia, Norway, Finland, U.S., Greenland and it was planned to be held in Kobe-City, Japan. Polar Cooperation Research Centre (PCRC) of Kobe University¹ hosted and logistically supported this online symposium.

PCRC is the research center belonging to the Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies (GSICS) of Kobe University. It is established in the first of kind and leading institution in polar legal and policy studies in Japan, focusing on the Arctic and Antarctic international legal and institutional developments. PCRC is subsidized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan (MEXT) as one of the executing agencies of Arctic Challenge for Sustainability II (ArCS II) project which is the national

flagship research project in the Arctic region of Japan.

The 13th PLS is the 7th international symposium for PCRC to host since 2015. Among the accumulated experiences, it was the first time to hold a symposium online. Hosting the online symposium requires completely different operations from the physical symposium, both logistically and technically. This report conveys the experience of hosting the 13th PLS special online session.²

The 13th PLS terminated on November 30th with 354 registered participants from 43 countries and regions. The Figure 1 shows the country of participants' affiliation, the countries with 5 or more participants are shown in the table. Japan accounts for 70 (20%) participants. 40 (11%) are participants from U.S., 27 (8%) are from Australia and 25 (7%) are from China. Figure 2 shows the composition of participants by regions. 34% of participants are from European countries, 32% from Asia, 16% from North America, 10% from Oceania and 6 % from Latin America. Such diversity of participants is showing the high level of interest in polar research from various regions of the world. And this large number of participants may have been possible because it was held online.

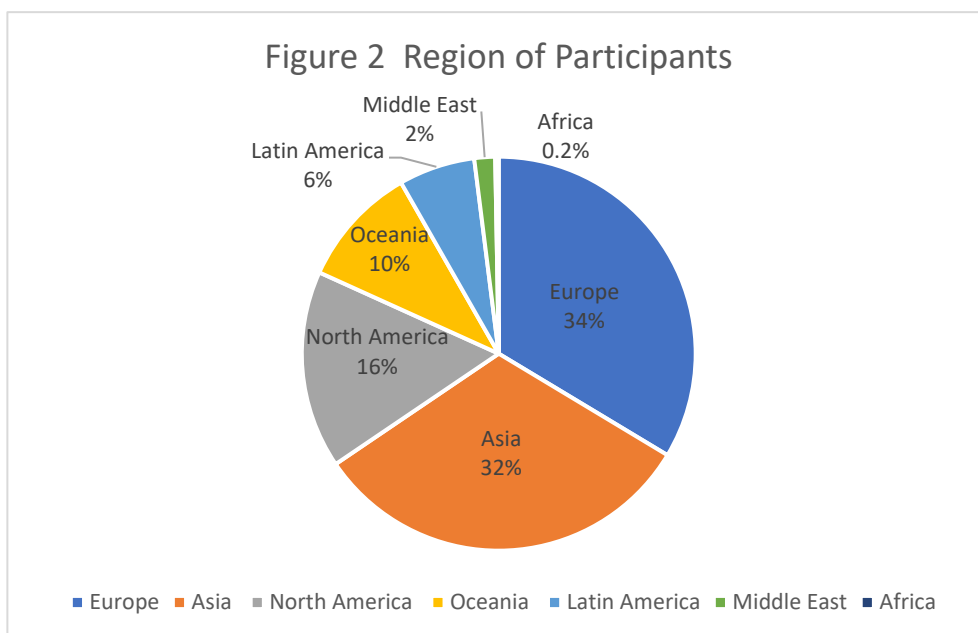
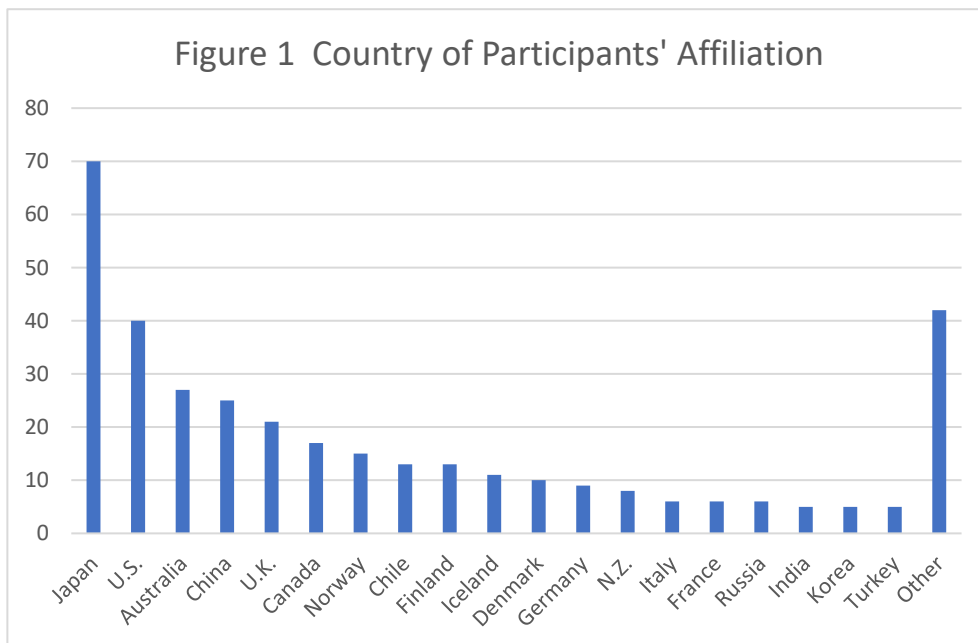
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¹ The web site of PCRC: <http://www.research.kobe-u.ac.jp/gsics-pcrc/index.html>

² The 13th PLS web Site: <https://2020polarlawssymposium.org/>

Another feature of the online event is the length of the session. The PLS is usually three-day event, but this special online session has been held for 3 weeks. One of the practical reasons for prolongation is the scheduling of seminars. During the session, 12 live events with 28 oral interactive presentations have successfully convened by Zoom meeting or webinar system. Unlike gathering at a

same conference hall, online participants from all over the world remain in their respective time zones. Working hours for Japan are sleeping hours for people on the other side of the globe. To accommodate participation in each seminar as much as possible, the schedule of seminars was adjusted to hold only one seminar per day.



The challenges faced by the Planning Committee is mainly technical issues related to system construction of website. Not only managing the pre-registration and entrant to 12 live seminars and hosting the ZOOM meetings, all seminars were delivered by YouTube Live for the people who missed the pre-registration. There were 580 viewers on YouTube. Almost all Zoom seminar were recorded and uploaded to the homepage for subsequent On-demand Video Viewing. These additional follow-ups of the live event made participants available three ways to attend; Zoom, YouTube Live and On-demand video viewing through the PLS website.

In addition to these live seminars, 43 individual presentations were uploaded either by PPT slideshows and/or by video recording. Each live seminar and individual presentation were given the dedicated web page to upload the materials and participants could leave their open comment on the pages. 77 textual comments and replies were written throughout the symposium. This personal comment-and-reply function can be assumed as an alternative to the discussion over coffee-break of the physical conference.

Another technical challenge supporting these various formats of online event was how to protect the presentation and recording files. The proceedings and presentation of PLS will be published in

The Yearbooks of Polar Law. The committee had to add technical protection to the contents to meet publishing conditions. The individual presentations have been embedded to the dedicated web page with special processing by the technical expert to protect from downloading. How easy would it be if this were just to project on the screen of the venue without distributing papers?

It can be said that the 13th PLS provided as much full service as possible online. All of these has been a good experience for future events under these situations, but one thing cleared was that hosting online event wouldn't save the cost of labor and time in preparation compared to the physical session.

It is indeed undeniable that participants accessing Zoom from their own room all over the world have created relaxing and friendly atmosphere and solidarity by sharing time and exchanging their opinions, but online symposium cannot be a full substitute for all the value involved in having a face-to-face discussion including informal conversation with new colleagues for network building.

The purpose of the PLS "is to examine, in detail, the implications of the challenges faced by the Polar Regions for international law and policy and to make recommendations on appropriate actions by States, policy makers and other international actors to respond to

these emerging and re-emerging challenges.”³ To tackle with these challenges, following 5 panels are established on the 13th PLS; 1) Emerging legal, policy and scientific issues in the Antarctic, 2) Policy-Law-Science Nexus in Polar Regions, 3) Emerging Legal Issues in Protecting the Arctic Environment, 4) Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic, 5) Resources Development and Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic. The accepted proposals to PLS were assigned to these 5 panels according to the theme. Among them, those selected as oral presentation were presented in the interactive live seminars convened by each panel.

One of the highlighted live seminars was the open lecture on the Arctic plastic problem: *‘Plastic Arctic’- How does law deal with the emerging threat of Arctic plastic pollution?* convened by the panel of Emerging Legal Issues in Protecting the Arctic Environment. The speaker was Dr. Seita Romppanen, Senior Lecturer in EU and International Environmental Law at the UEF Center for Climate Change, Energy and Environmental Law (CCEEL) and the commentator was Dr. Junko Toyoshima, Research fellow at Ocean Policy Research Institute, Sasakawa Peace Foundation. Dr. Romppanen discussed about the legal and regulatory framework of plastic pollution. She carefully examined and explained the

possible international and regional legal approaches and the limits and weakness of the current legal system on this issue. Dr. Toyoshima, as a scientist who just came back from the Arctic cruise on the oceanographic research vessel "Mirai", operated by the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology (JAMSTEC), reported the current state of plastic pollution based on the latest research. She reported that arctic ocean is the hotspot of microplastics, and microfiber concentration in seawater is the highest in the arctic while fishing tools are the most harmful to the arctic wildlife.

The discussion was inevitably directed to the need for cooperation between natural and social scientists. These dialogue between lawyers and scientists are symbolic for PLS. A lot of other issue emerging in the polar regions need for legal and political control on human activities based on the scientific facts and predictions

Throughout the symposium, it was impressive that young legal scholars were seeking applicability the traditional international law to the emerging issues in the polar regions by their analysis and interpretation. The possible solution would be refined and strengthened through discussions with researchers of other fields and other stake holders just as it was at this

³The Polar Law Institute;

symposium. In that sense, it is convinced that the Polar Law Symposium will be an increasingly important venue for researchers all over the world to share their scientific knowledge on diverse issues in polar regions.

PCRC will proudly host the 14th Polar Law Symposium in 2021 as well.

Provisionally, we plan to hold the physical meeting on 21 to 23 November at Kobe University Main Campus in Kobe, Japan. We are hoping this pandemic will be settled down soon and looking forward to meeting you in-person in Kobe next year.

