

**ENVIRONMENTAL FUTURES AND THE STEFÁNSSON LEGACY  
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I would like to use this opportunity to say a couple of words about explorer and anthropologist Vilhjálmur Stefánsson and how his legacy is connected to issues of human-environmental relations and sustainability that are the focus of the new Icelandic Arctic Institute bearing his name.

Stefánsson was often referred to as the prophet of the North. The core of his prophecy was that by learning from people whose ancestors have lived in the Arctic for thousands of years adapting to the environment and accumulating a body of knowledge handed down from one generation to another. The Arctic was not merely a harsh and inhospitable part of the world. The Arctic could thus be perceived as a friendly place, but only if it was approached with an open attitude, unprejudiced and with a willingness to learn from its inhabitants. This means that the full range of the natural resources at hand, the entire ecological niches, had to be exploited in order for people to survive.

Stefánsson's message was controversial and was not met with much understanding from many of his contemporaries who did not sympathise with his role as an advocate for the Eskimo way of life. In fact, most of the Arctic explorers were quite uninterested in the people who lived in the far north and showed little appreciation for their culture. Stefánsson stood out with his progressive attitudes, plea for the end of ethnocentrism and critique of European cultural intrusion which prevailed in the beginning of the century. In his lectures on the Arctic he often used Inuit society as a mirror for his American audience to reflect on their own society. Why were they not happy, in spite of all the material wealth? He claimed to know people who owned almost nothing in terms of material belongings and yet were the happiest humans he knew. He was engaged in such ethnographic cultural critique a long time before Margaret Mead became a celebrity.

I cannot help mentioning that Stefánsson was proud of his Icelandic origin and his identity reflected this. In Iceland Stefánsson's writings received much popularity and today he is still seen, by many, as being an Icelander, no less than Leifur Eiríksson. Nobel prize writer Halldór Kiljan Laxness said in 1927 that Vilhjálmur Stefánsson was gifted with the widest of perspectives of all of his contemporaries and the richest view over the diversity of the human condition.

It is indeed interesting to note how the life and work of Stefánsson himself also link up to the contemporary discourse on the importance of recognising the value of native knowledge. As I said before, the core of his prophecy contained the simple message that the Arctic could indeed be wonderful if those who went there learned from the people who have lived there for a long time and left behind some of their prejudices and ethnocentrism. His conflict with missionaries reflects his views that it was a mistake to force alien and inappropriate values onto cultures and environments where they do not adapt and have little chance of surviving. In many ways Stefánsson's message was amazingly modern and in line with the changes in questions, assumptions, paradigms and practices which seem to be taking place today within the Arctic scientific community. It has, however, not received the attention and recognition it deserves.

In his time Stef did more, perhaps more than any other individual, to change the image of the Arctic, moving it from the periphery of being a bleak frozen waste towards a centre of international significance and attention. Today values are indeed shifting north and times are changing. This is happening rapidly, some would say much too fast, and the Arctic is becoming a focus of social, economic, environmental and political concern.

We can learn a great deal from history about the sustainable adaptation of societies to their environments with methods and social structures that qualify as successful adaptation. We humans use culture to adapt to our environments, to transform raw nature as a biophysical entity into a meaningful environment which we use for appropriation. If there is a mismatch between culture and nature we run into trouble. One example of such a failure is the sad end of Norse life in medieval Greenland where it has been argued that the farmer's culture did not adapt to suit natural conditions and climatic change. This is the conclusion of a recent paper published in the journal *Holocene* called "Interdisciplinary investigations of the end of the Norse Western Settlement in Greenland", written by Astrid Ogilvie, Jon Haukur Ingimundarson at the Stef Institute and some other members of NABO (North Atlantic Bio-Cultural Organization). According to the paper: "Had the Norse adopted toggling harpoons and other Inuit ice hunting technology, they could have taken ringed seals all year long, and the possibility of crisis in the late winter/early spring might have been avoided." (Barlow *et al.* 1997).

From the paleoenvironmental study of the fate of the Norse Western settlement in Greenland we may also be able to draw some wider conclusions and learn from the insights a specific local problem offers in the understanding of global issues. It also raises questions such as whether western industrial and high-consumption societies are making similar mistakes but this times with much more serious implications and with the viability of humanity at stake.

I believe it is a necessity to learn from the voices of past generations and deliver these lessons to future generations. Our elders can often teach us about de-materialistic values, avoiding the definition of quality of life as limitless consumption of material goods and services, and of quantity being the same as quality of life. They are thus a resource for

our children who must adopt less environmentally destructive lifestyles and worldviews than those presently witnessed. In many ways our old people with their roots in the society of farming and fishing represent another culture and era, much like the indigenous cultures today, from which we can also learn a great deal, about sustainable relationships to nature and among people. In both cases we may find common themes of respect for the land and the sea. We also find an understanding of human needs as definite and therefore the possibility that the satisfaction of needs is attainable. In western societies the sky tends to be the limit with the resulting over consumption, over-exploitation of resources and unhappiness, an inevitable result of culturally defining human needs as mainly material and indefinite. The past and contemporary small-scale communities of indigenous peoples can provide us with cultural paradigms which enable us to change our practices and lifestyles, values and worldviews, into patterns that contribute to long term sustainability of human societies. This is what sustainable development is all about and it is especially pertinent for people who live in or are otherwise engaged in the Arctic region to remember that the region may well function as the canary bird of the earth, an early warning system for unsustainable global social and economic processes.

**Reference:**

Barlow, L.K., Sadler, J.P., Ogilvie, A.E.J., Buckland, P.C., Amorosi, T., Ingimundarson, J.H., Skidmore, P., Dugmore, A.J., & McGovern, T.H. 1997. Interdisciplinary investigations of the end of Norse Western Settlement in Greenland. *The Holocene* 7(4): 489-499.

