



# Reversing Polarity

Anthropologist **Dr William W Fitzhugh** has uncovered thousands of years of indigenous history, dispelling notions that Arctic peoples were marginalised by their environment. He finds returning knowledge to the North as exciting as discovering it

## To contextualise your work, could you begin with an overview of the Arctic Studies Centre (ASC)?

The Smithsonian's ASC is a museum-based organisation that conducts research and educational programmes on the history, art and cultures of the circumpolar North. The ASC engages in anthropological and natural history studies that seek to understand the history of northern lands, peoples and cultures from ancient times to the present. It documents these studies by collecting and archiving archaeological, ethnographic and oral historical materials and disseminates knowledge in scientific literature, popular publications, conferences, exhibitions and through electronic media. Today, all of the ASC's activities are carried out with indigenous partnerships and community collaboration.

## To what extent are Inuit communities adapting to these changing and inaccessible environments?

Arctic peoples have experienced climate and environmental changes for thousands of years and will also find ways to adapt to the current changes. Villages can be moved to higher ground or to a location closer to shifting resources. There will be increased dependence on external opportunities as industries expand into the North and transportation developments bring new efficiencies.

## Are there any initiatives currently in place to guarantee culture preservation and sustainable development? How can we promote and best utilise informal learning environments such as museums?

The ASC has promoted culture preservation through indigenous access to Smithsonian collections, archives and participation in research programmes, publications and exhibits. Our exhibits present the finest early 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century objects, along with ethnographic photographs and field observations to the attention of the public, and through travelling tours, illustrated catalogues, websites and lecture programmes they reach Native and northern audiences. The creation of permanent ASC exhibit facilities at the Anchorage Museum have made it possible to conduct office workshops on bent-wood technology, snowshoe construction, mask-making and other topics with Native artists and cultural practitioners utilising Smithsonian objects in the Anchorage exhibit. These discussions are videotaped and streamed

online, bringing conversations with elders in Native languages and English to wide audiences, including schools and local culture centres throughout Alaska.

## The 1992 Earth Summit was the first to include representatives from indigenous communities. How can we work towards a more integrated platform for Inuit people?

Because International Polar Year (IPY) project guidelines called for the inclusion of indigenous partners, IPY 2007-08 was the first time that Inuit people took an active role as research partners across a wide variety of scientific field research projects. The issuance of 'Principles for the Conduct of Research in the Arctic' by the Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee (IARPC) in the early 1990s was instrumental in implementing this change. These practices had been ingrained in social science research methods for many years, but had not been common previously in physical and biological science work. Today, the rise of local permitting procedures, as well as the support of government agency permits, has resulted in indigenous voices being represented in most areas of research in the North.

## What can be learnt from the historical development and cultural resilience of northern communities? What do we have left to discover?

Archaeological studies offer many examples of how Arctic peoples have responded to climate, environmental and social or political changes in the past. Previously, migration was a common solution to the loss of local resources or the attraction of new resources. Those who moved and adapted survived, while those that failed to do so, did not. In northern Eurasia, groups that adopted reindeer breeding as a more secure economy than hunting wild reindeer, flourished and expanded.

We have detailed knowledge of the past 2,000 years of Eskimo cultural development but have still to discover the earlier history of Eskimo culture origins: where and when it occurred, and how much of its origin is of Siberian rather than Beringian or North Pacific stimulus. The peopling of the New World occurred primarily if not exclusively via Alaska, but as yet the parent cultures and genetic history of Siberian progenitors are unknown. Athapascan Indians and Eskimo peoples appear to have been the last Siberians to reach North America, but which of these came first, and at what time? And finally, was a warming climate the primary instigator for the migration of Arctic peoples, such as the Dorset and Thule Inuit migrations from Alaska into the Eastern Arctic or the Viking movement to Greenland and Vinland? Or were social, economic, and political factors equally important? Every year brings new surprises.



EXCAVATION AT 1000 BC BRONZE-AGE KHIRIGSUUR BURIAL MOUND AT LAKE KHOTAN, MONGOLIAN ALTAI

# Discovering the Circumpolar North

Researchers at the **Arctic Studies Centre** have pieced together the anthropological and ethnological history of the region to promote awareness of a society frequently ignored

**THE SMITHSONIAN ARCTIC STUDIES CENTRE (ASC)**, founded by Dr William W Fitzhugh, has been studying the circumpolar North since 1988. As one expects from long-term studies, research at the ASC has been all-encompassing, not only looking at the present, but at the past, with findings disseminated through a number of different platforms and forums. Indeed, the ASC/Smithsonian archaeological and ethnological collections have provided much insight into the background of the Inuit region.

The Arctic benefits from having what Fitzhugh calls a 'unified framework', meaning that, unlike other locations, animal species and conditions are consistent throughout. "For this reason the human history of the North can be traced as a nearly continuous record from 40,000 years ago to the present," clarifies Fitzhugh. ASC's research on tens of thousands of examples of technology, art, clothing and paraphernalia forms the basis of scientific reports and exhibitions that document the origins and development of Arctic peoples and culture.

## RESEARCH AND DISSEMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE

ASC recently hosted the 18<sup>th</sup> Inuit Studies Conference, which covered a range of research topics, such as climate change, Eskimo culture and heritage, international cooperation in the Arctic, arts, and languages. It is the only conference of its kind to deal with the long-term study of the region. The Centre is also a key player in the US Government's Arctic Research Plan, created to manage Federal Agency research, assess the sustainability and resilience of communities, and improve the effectiveness of current climate change adaptability measures.

Indeed, it is this adaptability – the Arctic people's ability to progress and change – that contradicts how many anthropologists once viewed the region. Because so little was known of the circumpolar North, with many areas inaccessible until relatively recently, it was assumed to be a refuge, where communities and individuals lived isolated, changeless, almost brutish lives. This view of the Arctic being uninhabitable vastness and only occupied recently by humans was soon brushed aside when Arctic cultures, such as the ancient Eskimos, were discovered to have developed elaborate cultures and arts thousands of years before European contact. Rather than being a periphery, the circumpolar North has been a highway of innovation, adaptation and culture contacts.

With climate change at the forefront of the global consciousness, the Arctic region has, for the first

time in its history, become a focal point. But northern people were aware of climate change long before scientists, with indigenous people voicing their concerns to the rest of the world prior to it being considered a problem. Their perception and innovation does not stop there. The world has benefitted from other aspects of their culture, too. Kayaks, waterproof clothing, and the European whaler's toggling harpoon, which led to the proliferation of whale oil, were first devised by the Inuit. Seen by explorers and then adapted by Basque and Dutch whalers, it quite literally spearheaded the first global energy boom.

The historical fabric of the Arctic is becoming better understood through the ASC's investigations of the origins and dispersal of ancient cultures, the rise of sea mammal hunting and reindeer herding, and the impacts of Vikings and other societies on Arctic peoples. A holistic study, based on the aforementioned unified framework, it has successfully tracked 40,000 years of anthropological history. Fitzhugh explains: "Unlike most other regions separated by vast oceans, circumpolar and boreal environments, biota, and cultures have experienced less spatial, ecological and chronological dislocation. Plants, animals and humans that develop an adaptation for one part of the circumpolar region can easily spread to other areas of the North".

## ONGOING STUDIES

New methods of research can be seen through the ASC indigenous science programme, community archaeology and partnerships in museum anthropology. Previous methods saw researchers sent to the frontline, investigating and gathering collections. However, this has been supplanted by new techniques which seek the involvement of indigenous people, whether in practical research or educational programming. "Stephen Loring's community archaeology with Innu and Inuit communities in Labrador is a pioneering ASC example of this empowering approach," concludes Fitzhugh. Aron Crowell, who directs the ASC anchorage office, has collaborated with Alaska Native teams on exhibits that bring priceless 19<sup>th</sup> Century Smithsonian collections back to Alaska, and Igor Krupnik has been documenting indigenous views of changing climate and sea ice with Alaskan whalers.

The ASC will continue its groundbreaking research, with ongoing studies and dissemination of knowledge concerning the current, problematic state of the Arctic world, including its changing climate and the reduction of sea ice, which is dramatically altering this traditionally frozen landscape into one that is seasonally ice-free.

## INTELLIGENCE

## INUIT STUDIES

### OBJECTIVES

- To convene at the Smithsonian the 18<sup>th</sup> biennial gathering of Arctic scholars known as the Inuit Studies Conference (ISC), October 24-28, 2012; to broaden participation by indigenous people, students, and early career scientists; and to support digital platforms to widen the conference audience
- To expand the traditional format of ISC-18 by situating it in a contemporary digital environment by developing an extensive website and by broadcasting key sessions and events in streaming media with interactive communication techniques. The conference addressed the outstanding issues of the Arctic world today, its rapidly changing climate and the dramatic reduction of sea ice that is transforming a 'frozen' world into a seasonally ice-free environment

### KEY COLLABORATORS

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**WILLIAM W FITZHUGH** directs the Smithsonian's Arctic Studies Center and is a Senior Scientist at the National Museum of Natural History. Fitzhugh has conducted archaeological field studies throughout the circumpolar region investigating cultural responses to climate and environmental change and European contact. In addition to books, exhibition catalogues, monographs, and more than 150 journal papers, he has produced large international exhibitions, popular films, and is a well-known lecturer and public speaker. Fitzhugh helped coordinated the ISC-18 in October, fulfilling his objectives of this study and achieving tremendous success.

