Can Climate Change Be Good for Greenland? An Arctic Island’s Response to New Development Opportunities

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Worldwide, Greenland is viewed as an indicator of global climate change—like Earth’s monitoring stations. The world’s largest island consists of eighty-one percent ice, and its melting ice contributes to about twenty-eight percent of current global sea-level rise. News coverage of Greenland centers upon the current melting rate of its ice sheets and scientists’ predictions of how much global sea level would rise if all of the ice sheets were to melt. However, little is written about how climate change will affect those who live there.

Despite its location, Greenland shares some similarities with the global south. Many of its 60,000 inhabitants subsist at least in part on nature, and its governance status is akin to a colony of a European nation. The government has welcomed the opportunity to establish greater economic independence from Denmark by “developing” Greenland. However, given that black carbon, in the form of soot-laden snow, accounts for about a third of the warming in the Arctic regions, is heavy industry, most of which is foreign-owned, a viable development path?

Greenland has seen rising temperatures at a more accelerated pace than the global rate. From 1991 to 2003 average winter temperatures rose eleven degrees Fahrenheit. However, many in Greenland embrace rising temperatures, as it opens up new opportunities across the island. For now, tourism is receiving a boost due to “discoveries” of new islands, previously inaccessible because of the ice, and these islands are now becoming vacation sites for cruise liners. Because of the warming temperatures, farmers can now plant vegetables that a few decades ago would have never survived, and raise fatter livestock.

The cod industry was once the greatest asset of Greenland, but in the 1960s it collapsed due to over-fishing and shifting sea currents. Now that the sea temperatures are the highest since the 1960s, the cod have returned, as evidenced by government inspectors, who in 2007 made a “biblical catch” of twenty-five tons of cod in one hour. Finally, the seasonal snowmelt continues to open up previously impassible areas.

Of course, not all benefit from the rising temperatures. Climate change harms the Inuit peoples’ way of life, particularly in the realm of hunting. The effects are devastating; “[r]etreating

**The sector most excited over Greenland’s warming is also the one whose activities intensify climate change—heavy industry.**

...
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The challenge is how to establish greater economic sovereignty, now that climate change has introduced more opportunities. Greenland stands at a crossroads. It can simply imitate the old model, or it can decide to be a model for other nations currently facing the moral dilemma of what to do when climate change actually presents beneficial development opportunities. Greenland should embrace the positive climate-induced changes of increased fish yields and better farming/grazing land, yet sustainably manage these resources. Otherwise, Greenland will yet again witness the effects of over-fishing its cod stocks, and the impacts of soil depletion and overgrazing. Instead of resorting to the economic and ecologic value in preserving their biodiversity, Greenland should consult with its own inhabitants, and heed Rio Declaration’s Principle 22, which recognizes the value that indigenous peoples have in environmental management and development due to their unique knowledge.20

Endnotes:

3 Denmark handles Greenland’s foreign relations (e.g., Greenland’s greenhouse gas (“GHG”) emissions are part of Denmark under the Kyoto Protocol). Nonetheless, Denmark must consult with Greenland’s Home Rule Government, which handles domestic affairs. While most of Greenland supports either full independence or greater autonomy from Denmark, a full fifty percent of Greenland’s revenue are subsidies from Denmark. CIA website, supra note 1.
5 Doug Struck, Icy Island Warms to Climate Change, WASH. POST, June 7, 2007, at A01.
7 Struck, supra note 5.
8 Struck, supra note 5.
9 Moskwa, supra note 6.
13 Thomas, id.
15 Thomas, supra note 12.
17 Moskwa, supra note 6.