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The Arctic: A Key to World Climate

The Arctic is part of a great global heat engine. Changes in the arctic atmosphere, ocean, sea ice, and permafrost are early precursors to climate change elsewhere. In the past, those changes have been drastic. Only 18,000 years ago, virtually all of Canada and some of the United States were covered by a thick layer of ice.

At the recent AAAS Annual Meeting, a symposium brought together some of the leading research scientists active in studies of resources and climate.* In one of the sessions, speakers reviewed information about the evolution of the arctic climate.

A principal impression that could be drawn from the symposium was that the current hypothesis concerning effects of greenhouse gases on arctic behavior is probably simplistic and may be quite wrong. The public has been told repeatedly that a result of increased greenhouse gases would be a substantial rise in sea level due to melting of polar ice. A related statement frequently made is that the increase in polar temperatures would be substantially greater than those of global averages. For example, one estimate is that an average rise of 2°C would be accompanied by a 10°C increase in the Arctic. That estimate may or may not adequately take into account climatic feedback mechanisms. At the symposium this point was raised implicitly by John T. Andrews, who stated that the Greenland Ice Sheet and the Laurentide Ice Sheet advanced during a period of warm water influx into Baffin Bay at the end of the last interglaciation.

The vapor pressure of water is quite sensitive to temperature. Condensing moisture in the form of snow provides a surface cover that highly reflects solar energy leading to a regional cooling. The albedo (reflectivity) of ordinary soil is about 0.1. The albedo of snow is about 0.8. At present, some of the arctic land areas that have averaged annual temperatures of about −14°C receive only 10 centimeters of total H_2O per year. Most of the time the surface is bare and is a good absorber of solar heat. Were more precipitation to occur, the total heat absorbed by the surface would decrease. With greater moisture in the air, there would be more clouds. The net effects of these are controversial. Some say that more clouds would reflect more energy away from the earth. Others point out that added moisture would enhance a greenhouse effect in the Arctic. In any event, the factors controlling arctic climate are complex.

One of the obstacles to confidence in predicting the future of the arctic climate is an imperfect knowledge of the past. We know that 70 million years ago, the climate was mild and the Arctic Ocean was ice-free. Sediments formed about 5 million years ago contained glacially related materials. We know little about what happened in the long interval, and knowledge concerning more recent events is sketchy. No long cores have been obtained from the Arctic Ocean. The impediment is the perennial ice sheet that covers most of that ocean. The thickness is usually about 3 to 4 meters, and the sheet tends to keep moving. At the geographic North Pole, the depth of the ocean is about 3500 meters.

Our best source of evidence concerning the last million years is found in near-shore sediments, and particularly on fossil-bearing terraces. Molluscan fossils are particularly useful. Different molluscan species have different temperature affinities. In addition, they contain partially hydrolyzed proteins. The degree of racemization of isoleucine is a function of times and temperatures. The shells also contain strontium as a trace element which provides a dating potential. The ratio of ^{87}Sr to ^{86}Sr in seawater has changed monotonically over the last several million years. For events during the past 40,000 years ^{14}C dating can be applied. Other types of fossils are being studied and additional dating methods employed. Measurements of ratios of ^{18}O to ^{16}O in ice are useful in determining temperatures at which atmospheric moisture was converted into ice. Oxygen isotope ratios of shells reveal temperatures present during their formation.

The importance of understanding the past, present, and future of the arctic climate requires that support for such activities have a top priority. Desirable efforts include more studies of fossils, an international program of deep drilling in the Arctic, more weather monitoring, and additional satellite surveillance of the polar region.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

*"The Arctic: A New Key to World Climate and Resources," organized by P. W. Barnes and K. A. Kvenvold of the U.S. Geological Survey, Menlo Park, CA, and held on 19 January 1989 in San Francisco, CA.

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