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The Art of Writing Environmental Myths in the Arctic:
Resilience and Meaning-Making at the UArctic Congress

Research Notes

Author

Michael Laiho
University of Oulu, Finland
Michael.laiho@student.oulu.fi

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Editors

Stefanie Kunze: Stefanie.Kunze@nau.edu

Ibrahim Berrada: Ibrahim.Berrada@nau.edu

Correspondence

The NORPAK Review
Department of Sociology
Northern Arizona University
5 E McConnell Dr.
Flagstaff, AZ 86011
NORPAK@nau.edu

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The Art of Writing Environmental Myths in the Arctic: Resilience and Meaning-Making at the UArctic Congress

Michael Laiho *

Attending the UArctic Congress reinforced many of the ideas I have been developing in my doctoral research, particularly those concerning the relationships between Arctic governance, authorship, resilience, and environmental myth-making. I had previously given a talk to the Arctic Circle Assembly on what the “death of the Arctic” could mean by exploring how important authorship is when considering who is writing and who is written about (Laiho, 2025). My UArctic Congress contribution, meanwhile, focused on alternative ways of understanding resilience in the context of EU Arctic policy-making, concluding that resilience can involve institutional biases and forms of decision-making malaise. This research note brings these strands together by considering the UArctic Congress itself as a space in which Arctic narratives are produced, negotiated, reproduced, and oftentimes contested.

The congress provided an opportunity to observe the obscurities of public debate and what they might mean for institutional resilience. Rather than treating conferences simply as spaces for presenting research, I consider them as sites in which recurring tropes of academic and policy discussion become visible. What struck me was not simply the diversity of perspectives present at the conference, but the way participants from different cultural, institutional, disciplinary, and political backgrounds collectively reproduced narratives about the Arctic while reaching, or failing to reach, consensus on their meaning. The UArctic Congress itself became an arena of what I call “myth-making:” a process through which existing meanings are reproduced, adapted, and made available for collective discussion.

For Roland Barthes (1957), myth transformed historically produced meanings into something that appears natural. It therefore provides a useful starting point for examining how particular understandings of the Arctic become familiar enough to structure political and academic discussion. I extend this concern by drawing tentatively on the Frankfurt School’s account of cultural production. Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1947) concept of the “culture industry” was developed to describe the standardisation and reproduction of cultural forms under modern capitalism. I do not suggest that an academic conference constitutes a culture industry in this strict sense. Rather, their work raises a related question: how are meanings produced, circulated, and reproduced through institutions that organise cultural and intellectual life? This question is particularly relevant to Arctic governance, where concepts such as sustainability, stewardship, security, and resilience circulate between academic, political, scientific, and civil-society communities.

*Michael Laiho is a doctoral researcher at the Geography Research Unit, University of Oulu, Finland. His research titled “Writing the Arctic: Resilience, Territoriality, and Environmental Myths in EU Arctic Policy” examines how environmental narratives shape the political construction of the Arctic, with particular attention to European Union Arctic policy. Drawing on literary theory, political geography, discourse analysis, and resilience thinking, his doctoral project explores how policy texts produce meanings of territoriality, environmental change, and governance. He has recently presented his research at international Arctic conferences, including the Arctic Circle Assembly and the UArctic Congress.

From a resilience perspective, conferences function as spaces of adaptation and coordination. Researchers, policymakers, indigenous representatives, NGOs, and institutional actors approach Arctic issues through different forms of expertise, values, and political priorities. Yet academic and institutional exchange also creates shared vocabularies. Concepts such as “Arctic stewardship,” “security,” and “resilience” allow participants to communicate across boundaries without necessarily resolving underlying tensions. In this sense, such concepts resemble the “boundary objects” described by Star and Griesemer (1989): flexible objects that can be interpreted differently by different social worlds while retaining enough common meaning to facilitate cooperation.

Several conversations during the conference highlighted this dynamic. Over coffee, one discussion about Faroese whaling practices led to a fascinating historical account connecting the Arctic Ocean to the Azores through seventeenth-century shipping and whaling routes. A colleague from the humanities presented this history through an international relations perspective, translating it into a language that could engage a wider audience. Another colleague reflected on how Norwegian and Greenlandic whaling traditions have increasingly become stigmatised through environmental and animal-rights discourses. Where he grew up, he explained, fishermen shared their catch as the Faroese have done for centuries, but political tensions now exist between Arctic communities, European institutions, and environmental NGOs because, in his words, “people don’t get it.”

The conversation demonstrated that environmental narratives are never simply scientific or objective. They are historical, cultural, and political because participants approach the same issues from different perspectives and institutional positions. Moving between conversations during panels and coffee breaks, I became particularly interested in the extent to which participants appeared to speak primarily within familiar disciplinary and institutional languages. Many also expressed frustration with Arctic governance institutions, which they perceived as reproducing an artificial “business as usual” framework. One colleague from Germany lamented how science-cooperation frameworks, such as the International Polar Year and even the Arctic Council, have succeeded more in managing access to Arctic affairs than in producing meaningful political exchange. Others suggested that Arctic events are, for better or worse, spaces where participants speak primarily to their own audiences, further reproducing familiar institutional languages rather than fundamentally transforming their worldviews.

This observation resonates with Carl Folke’s (2016) understanding of resilience as involving persistence, adaptation, and transformability. Arctic institutions clearly demonstrate adaptive capacity: policies are revised, concepts evolve, and governance frameworks are continually reframed in response to criticism or geopolitical change. However, adaptation does not necessarily lead to transformation. Resilience can instead function as a mechanism through which institutions maintain legitimacy and continuity under changing conditions. The persistence of familiar narratives may therefore itself be understood as a form of resilience, particularly when institutions can incorporate criticism without fundamentally altering the assumptions upon which governance is based. Kevin Grove (2018) argues that systems of

governance assemble frameworks around resilience, which changes its meaning and application to suit the needs of policy experts who design policies for complex, changing environments like the Arctic.

This perspective has implications for my own doctoral research. First-hand accounts from interviews with EU policymakers have taught me that Arctic events like UArctic can function as boundary objects in their own right, providing spaces where participants negotiate key facts about the region while navigating their own institutional roles, biases, and responsibilities. Resilience thinking has consequently encouraged me to pay greater attention to moments of contradiction, uncertainty, or criticism, which may reveal more about how institutions adapt and preserve themselves than apparently successful policy outcomes.

This is particularly important when considering whose knowledge is produced through Arctic research. At the FRONT Autumn School, Sámi scholar Siggá-Marja Magga described an old saying that “a Sami family consists of mother, father, children and one researcher because they were so researched” (Magga, 2025). She explained that research conducted on Sámi communities had often benefited researchers more than the communities themselves, contributing to a desire among Sámi communities to conduct research themselves. This observation complicates the apparently progressive function of knowledge production. Conferences and research projects may create opportunities for new perspectives, but they can also reproduce established relationships between those who produce knowledge and those who become its subjects.

My doctoral project, *Writing the Arctic: Resilience, Territoriality, and Environmental Myths in EU Arctic Policy*, approaches policy documents not merely as administrative texts but as sites where governance is negotiated and stabilised. Environmental narratives such as the Anthropocene, peak oil, and the concept of the global commons provide institutions with linguistic frameworks through which changing political and environmental conditions can be interpreted and incorporated into policy. These narratives do not necessarily determine policy outcomes. Rather, they make particular forms of governance available as reasonable, necessary, or natural.

The connection between conference discourse and EU policymaking is therefore not that one directly causes the other. Rather, both participate in wider processes of knowledge production. Ideas circulate between scientific reports, academic conferences, policy consultations, institutional communications, and political documents. Their meanings can change as they move between these contexts, while certain recurring formulations remain recognisable. This is where the concept of myth becomes useful: it draws attention to the process through which historically contingent interpretations can become sufficiently familiar to appear self-evident.

The UArctic Congress consequently provided a useful empirical setting for reconsidering resilience as a discursive process. Its participants did not reach consensus on what the Arctic is, which it should become, or how it should be governed. Yet the congress nevertheless produced forms of continuity through recurring concepts, narratives, and institutional languages. In this respect, resilience may involve not only responding to environmental or

geopolitical change, but sustaining the meanings through which institutions understand that change.

This also points towards a future research agenda. Rather than treating discourse analysis and literary theory as separate approaches, further research could examine the cultural production of environmental narratives across the spaces through which they circulate. Barthes' account of myth could be brought into dialogue with contemporary work on environmental discourse and the production of environmental "myths" (E.g. Benjaminsen, 2021), while research on Arctic cultural and sustainability discourse demonstrates how conferences themselves can become sites for organising competing narratives about the region (Huhmarniemi and Jokela, 2020). Recent work explicitly conceptualising the Arctic as a boundary object also suggests that the production of shared but contested meanings may be central to how Arctic governance is negotiated (Hansen-Magnusson and Gehrke, 2025). A more sustained engagement with cultural production, meanwhile, could test whether insights from Adorno and Horkheimer can illuminate the institutional reproduction and standardisation of environmental narratives beyond their original context. Such an approach would allow my doctoral research to examine not only how EU policy texts construct the Arctic, but how the narratives contained within them are produced, circulated, adapted, and made resilient across wider communities of knowledge.

Ultimately, resilience in Arctic governance may not simply concern the ability to respond to environmental or social challenges brought about by shifting geopolitics. It may also concern the ability of institutions to sustain meaning, legitimacy, and authority through discourse itself. What the UArctic Congress revealed to me is that Arctic governance is shaped not only through formal policymaking, but through ongoing negotiations among experts, institutions, activists, indigenous communities, and scientific narratives. These negotiations rarely produce full consensus. Instead, they produce adaptable myths: varying perspectives on the same issues that allow different actors to communicate while making particular forms of governance appear natural, necessary, and resilient.

My experiences at UArctic therefore raise a broader question for my doctoral research: if resilience allows institutions to adapt without fundamentally transforming, then whose voices, interests, and futures are ultimately being stabilised through Arctic policy discourse – and whose are left outside of it?

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