

What is the relationship between culture and place?

Alert!

We have some breaking news from WPHO. Team GoNorth! needs your help.

Beringia is changing—fast!

Just ask people who live along its shores—the Native Alaskan Inupiaq, the Yup'ik, or Chukotka's Chukchi—who hunt on the sea ice on coastal Alaska for most of the year. They know the ice better than anyone. For literally thousands of years, they have passed down knowledge from one generation to the next on how to successfully and safely hunt and travel on the sea ice. Hunting on the sea ice is still a very important part of their livelihood. However, today hunters are reporting that the ice has become dangerous and is shifting.

Ice is a big deal in Beringia, the destination for this year's adventure learning expedition.

About 20,000 years ago, most of the surrounding lands were covered in a sheet of ice. Today, only Greenland and Antarctica still have ice sheets, but back then, most of the planet was covered with it.

That's because the earth was a lot colder then. In order to make an ice sheet, it has to be cold. As snow falls on top of the ice sheet, it compresses prior snowfalls into layers of ice. Think about it: Since most of the world's water was falling and freezing, not much of it was making it back to the ocean. As a result, the oceans were a lot shallower than they are today—so shallow, in fact, that United States' Alaska and Russia's Chukotka were connected by a long stretch of land called the Bering land bridge.

The first people to walk on the continent of North America likely crossed over this land bridge.

So what happened to it? Global climate change did. The earth got warmer, the ice sheets melted, and the Bering land bridge turned into the Bering Sea.

The world got warmer—but not warm enough to melt the frozen Arctic. Over hundreds and hundreds of generations, those first folks to stroll across the Bering land bridge settled into the cold Arctic climate. Today, their great, great, great, great, great, great—you get the idea—grandchildren still live in much the same way. Sure, Alaska's Inupiaq use mostly snowmobiles today instead of dogsleds. But the foods they eat, the stories they tell, the animals they see, the traditions they believe, and their knowledge of the Arctic are all passed down from generation to generation.

But guess what? Things are changing again. This time, it's humans who consume fossil fuels such as oil and coal that are causing the planet to warm up. Two hundred years ago, during the Industrial Revolution, people learned that they could harness the power of fire to run machinery. Every since then, we've consumed ever greater amounts of fuel in our quest for industrialization.

Our activities on earth have rapidly changed the composition of the atmosphere. Today the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is higher than recorded in the past 800,000 years. This means that more of the sun's heat is trapped next to the planet's surface—and thus earth's climate is changing more rapidly than at any time in human history, and that, in turn, is altering places on its surface.

When a place changes, what impact does that have on the cultures that call that place home? In Beringia, the impact is immediate and life-altering. For a people who extract their survival off the sea ice—where most of the game spends its time—its disappearance is nothing short of catastrophic. Sea levels are higher; erosion is rampant; ice and soil are melting. It all adds up to a radical change for the Inupiaq.

During the United Nations' fifteenth climate summit, known as COP15, representatives from more than 200 countries gathered in Denmark to address the urgent need to deal with climate change on a global scale. Among the delegates were GoNorth! expedition leader Mille Porsild, team member Christine Germano, and a group of youth from the community of Shishmaref on the American coast of Alaska, a town that literally must move to a new location because of climate change. Also attending were indigenous Arctic youth from Uummannaq in Greenland, Norway, and Baffin Island in Canada's Nunavut.

"It is the generation of our youth that will truly deal with the consequences if adults today will not make changes and tough choices to stop climate change," says Mille. She continues, "For this reason I believe the strongest voice in the global conversation on climate change is that of our youth! Honest and unafraid to speak the truth, the youth I had the honor to travel to COP15 with shared the most powerful stories of changes that have already happened to the way of life in their communities because of climate change. No other stories matter more today to all of us."

Why do their stories matter to all of us? Well, first of all, having one's culture protected is a human right, guaranteed under international law! Moreover, when it comes down to it, we are all affected by a rapidly changing Arctic, which serves vital functions that help regulate the world's climate. Moreover, the people of the Arctic are just a bit ahead of the curve—and we're all starting to go around the same bend. Most of the world is beginning to see the impact of climate change firsthand as new, unpredictable weather patterns are becoming the new norm.

Beringia is only one dramatic example of the complicated interconnections between human culture and the physical environment. Take a step back and look around you—you'll soon start to see the evidence of this relationship in your life. The clothes you wear, the modes of transportation in your region, the meals you eat, even the very words that come out of your mouth...all of these things are in some way shaped by the physical world you live in. In other words, when that world changes, your culture is bound to change as well. The good thing is that humans are incredibly skilled at adapting. If we make the decision to do so, we can decide right now to actively change our cultures in ways that protect and restore the planet for future generations!

On this mission, Team GoNorth! reports that they urgently need your help with three things. The first is to investigate what makes a place a place. The second is to explore how the people of these cultures respond to large-scale changes in the places they live. And finally, based on your analysis of how a people such as the Inupiaq, Chukchi, and Yup'ik are now forced to adapt to the rapid climate changes, help the team provide a recommendation for how to answer the important question: How are people and cultures shaped by their environments?

Good luck, explorers!