

BCS 100 – Module 5

The History of the Circumpolar World

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Key Terms and Concepts

Adaptation
Assimilation
Colonialism
Exploration
Migration

Learning Objectives and Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

Describe the main stages of the history of the Circumpolar World, from its initial peopling to contemporary times;

List and describe the conditions and motives that encouraged the peopling of the Circumpolar North;

Explain the importance of landscape to the shaping of aboriginal and historic communities in the Circumpolar North;

Understand the reasons why Europeans, Russians and North Americans explored and settled the Subarctic and Arctic regions; and

Recognize the historic roots of contemporary conditions in the Circumpolar North.

Overview

The current distribution of peoples, communities and national boundaries in the Circumpolar North is the result of thousands of years of human choices, ecological changes, political decisions, government policies, and economic actions. The history of the Circumpolar North is complex, with each region and sub-region experiencing unique and specific circumstances, but there are several unifying themes that tie the Arctic and Subarctic together. The Northern regions are more than just sparsely populated and politically vulnerable extensions of southern nations. They are important parts of the globe, connected by a shared experience of northern climates, comparable economic and social structures, and strongly influenced by historic contacts between Indigenous peoples and newcomers. Over time, the peoples of the North have, with some variations, experienced the following: the search for viable trade routes, the establishment of valuable fur trading enterprises, the spread of missionary activities (based on attempts to convert the “heathen” Aboriginal peoples to some variation of Christianity), regional struggles for political recognition and autonomy, the re-emergence of Aboriginal political power, and the development of a growing sense of Circumpolar identity. The pattern is by no means complete or absolute—Iceland did not have an Aboriginal population; missionary efforts in Russia were not as extensive as those in northern Canada; and the political struggles reflected national realities as much as northern aspirations—but there are substantial common elements running through the history of the Circumpolar World.

First Peoples of the North

The migration of human beings to northern regions is a complex and multi-cultural enterprise. Aboriginal societies, each rooted in a profound relationship with their traditional territories, have powerful stories about the emergence of people from the earth and the subsequent development of complex societies in northern regions. Western scholars discarded these stories, calling them “myths” and “legends,” and relegating them to the intellectual margins of historical understanding. (This same western tradition, it must be noted, is founded on the belief in the creation of the world as outlined in the Bible, with its own compelling story of how the earth was created and how human life emerged.) While there has been a great deal of attention paid in recent years to Indigenous historical accounts and oral traditions, most scholars still discount Aboriginal stories of creation and the placement of specific societies on the globe.

As a result of a great deal of archaeological and, increasingly, genetic research, scholars have offered different, scientific explanations for the expansion of human populations. The peopling of the earth, the lengthy expansion of human populations around the globe, has been described by Brian Fagan as “The Great Journey” (1987). It was perhaps the greatest—and least known—endeavour in human history. If one accepts the current archeological and scientific evidence—and there is a great deal of debate about the meaning of a small number of discoveries—human populations originated in Africa and slowly spread through the temperate zones (areas without extreme cold or extreme heat). Over thousands of years, people slowly moved out of known areas, pulled by opportunities or pushed by conflict or ecological difficulties in their territories. They discovered new lands and territories, containing vastly different animals, plants and living conditions.

The Northern zones—with less food available, colder conditions, and greater threats to human existence—were occupied later than warmer areas. Peoples searching for new opportunities or

fleeing difficulties in southern regions, migrated further north, ranging eventually across Siberia and into northern Europe. They adapted to northern conditions, developing clothing, shelter, transportation, and harvesting systems well-suited for the Subarctic and Arctic conditions. In the process, they gradually developed the social, cultural, and economic foundations for life in northern areas. At an unknown time, perhaps 10,000 years ago, perhaps 20,000 years ago or even further in the past, people first entered the Americas from what is now Siberia into what is now Alaska. The prevailing theory is that, at the time of the expansion, global water levels were much lower than at present because of an ice age. As a consequence, the waterway now known as the Bering Strait did not exist; in its place, there was the short and easily crossed Bering Land Bridge, which carried the Aboriginal peoples into northern North America. There is a substantial debate raging about subsequent developments. For many years, scholars argued that the migration to the south occurred by way of a corridor that had been opened up by the retreating ice fields. More recent scholarship has argued convincingly that these new peoples moved south along the Pacific Coast, eventually inhabiting all of North and South America.

More migrations occurred in later years. The last major, pre-European migration appears to have occurred between 3,000 and 4,000 years ago, when the ancestors of the contemporary Inuit moved from Siberia to North America. Discovering that the Subarctic lands were occupied [?the general consensus on this seems to be that these peoples were Arctic-adapted and chose the Arctic], they likely followed the Arctic coastline to the east, eventually spreading across the northern slope of Alaska and through the Canadian Arctic islands to Greenland. Climate conditions at the time allowed the early migrants to move well to the north, successfully inhabiting the High Arctic islands. When the climate turned cold once again, they were forced to move south, into the areas where they later encountered Europeans.

Student Activity 1

Read “Canada’s First Nations: Migration Theories,” available at http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/firstnations/theories.html

“Did First Americans Arrive by Land and Sea?” by Hillary Mayell, available at http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/11/1106_031106_firstamericans.html

“Who were the First Americans,” by Stefan Lovgren, available at http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/09/0903_030903_bajaskull.html

“Discovery Casts Doubt on Bering Land Bridge Theory,” by Allison M. Heinrichs, available at http://www.edenseve.net/discovery_casts_doubt_on_bering_.htm

After reading these articles, compare and contrast the evidence to support the idea that Aboriginal people reached North America by way of the Bering Land Bridge. State and defend your opinion about this debate in about two paragraphs.

Southern Encounters with the North

For many generations, the peoples of the North had very little contact with, or even knowledge of, societies to the south. Individual cultures had contact with neighbouring societies, and occasionally with peoples further removed from their homelands. There were more encounters in northern Europe, particularly in what became known as Scandinavia and Russia, as the line of contact was longer and more active. The Indigenous peoples of northern North America, in

contrast, had limited experience with southern societies and no knowledge, that we know of, about the evolving cultures of Europe. In Europe, rapidly changing societies expanded from an agricultural base to develop the beginnings of industrial activity and to create growing trade networks throughout Europe and into surrounding regions. The Europeans were puzzled about far northern regions, about which they knew very little and which were shrouded in mystery and mythology. To optimists, the Arctic regions hosted a wide open sea beyond an ice barrier, offering great riches, navigation routes to the far corners of the globe, and exciting opportunities for those willing to brave the unknown. Pessimists, the far larger group, feared the northland, believing it to be inhospitable and unable to sustain human life. Their images of the unknown land contained unthinkable monsters, frightening landscapes, and only danger.

Southern societies gradually expanded their reach across the Circumpolar world, overcoming their fears, exercising vision and dreams, and hoping to encounter either great wealth or trade routes that would take them to the storied lands of the Far East. The Norse expanded first, venturing west to Iceland, which they occupied after 870 as the first inhabitants, and pressing further on, eventually reaching Greenland and North America about 1,000 years ago. They established small settlements in southern Greenland and the northern part of Newfoundland. The settlements did not succeed and the Norse expeditions to the west ended by the early 15th century.

There were powerful forces pushing Europeans to continue to explore to the North. Improvements in ship-building made it possible to sail for greater distances and times from home ports. Rumours of northern wealth, and of routes to the east and west, spurred on adventurers. The desire for new sources of resources, such as gold and minerals, but even more for basic items like furs, encouraged companies to back sizeable expeditions toward North America and Siberia. The establishment of more powerful governments, backed by powerful armies and navies, resulted in a “race” into uncharted territories as the governments sought to establish claims to new lands. There were, as well, desires to spread Christianity to the so-called heathen (or non-Christian) peoples known to be in the northern areas, and a strong interest in learning more about areas that were either blank on the map or filled only on a speculative basis.

Table 1 Major Exploration Events (All Things Arctic, 1998, <http://www.allthingsarctic.com/exploration/timeline.aspx>)

Date	Event
Approximately 18,000 BP	First people arrive in North America from Asia on the Bering land bridge, also known as Beringia
AD 850	Norse people settle in Iceland
AD 981	Eric the Red visits northwest coast of Greenland
1490	John Cabot first proposes existence of a Northwest Passage
1534	Jacques Cartier explores St. Lawrence River for Northwest Passage
1576	Martin Frobisher discovers Frobisher Bay
1581	Yermak campaigns in Siberia as far as the Tatar capital Sibir
1586	John Davis explores western shores of Greenland
1596	Willem Barents discovers Spitsbergen and seeks Northeast Passage
1612	William Baffin explores Hudson and Baffin bays
1639	A group of Russians are the first Europeans to reach the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk
1648	Semyon Dezhnev is the first European to sail around the eastern tip of Asia
1728	Vitus Jonassen Bering discovers Bering Strait while seeking Northeast Passage

1741 – Semyon Chelyuskin reaches most northern point in Asia
1770 – Ivan Lyakhov explores Novosibersky Ostrova [New Siberian Islands] in Siberia
1822 – William Parry sails through Hudson and Hecla straits
1845 – John Franklin’s lost expedition proves existence of Northwest Passage
Adapted from All Things Arctic, 1998, <http://www.allthingsarctic.com/exploration/timeline.aspx>

A very detailed summary of the development of the circumpolar North is given in Amanda Graham’s (2002-05) Circumpolar History Timetables, available at <http://www.yukoncollege.yk.ca/~agraham/nost202/timetables.htm>.

Student Activity 2

The early explorers left dramatic, but not always accurate, descriptions of the North. Read the reports left by Martin Frobisher, who was the first European to reach the Canadian Arctic Islands. On the basis of Frobisher’s materials, what impressions do you think Europeans gained of the newly encountered territory? How accurate do you think Frobisher’s account was?

Martin Frobisher’s account begins on page 74 of *The Principle Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, collected by Richard Hakluyt, 1889, available at: <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/33128?id=b7e3560c942ac84c>

Developing Southern Interest in the North

The very early stages of exploration in the Circumpolar North proved

That there was a vast land mass to the north

That the northern regions were inhabited, however sparsely, by societies that were uniquely adapted to life in the area

That navigation of Arctic waters was very difficult and dangerous

That there might well be valuable resources in the region, but they would be very difficult to develop

Faced with these realities, European nations moved slowly and with difficulty to understand and exploit the region. As early as the 9th century, the Finns, Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes, in search of trading opportunities, had expanded northward along the coasts of the Gulf of Bothnia and along the northern coastline of Norway. In the 14th century and later, Russians moved slowly to the east, discovering valuable fields for the development of the fur trade. The Norse settlements in Iceland became more stable, but efforts to expand westward halted after the early 15th century.

It was fish and other marine resources, not the more dramatic search for gold and precious minerals, that spurred the next period of expansion to the North. In the course of the early explorations, the Europeans discovered vast quantities of fish and sea mammals in the lightly harvested Arctic seas beginning in the 15th century. As Europe was rapidly overusing available fish stocks closer to the

continent, these distant discoveries proved to be extremely valuable. The pursuit of cod fish, whales, and walrus drew fishers into the waters off Norway, Iceland, western Greenland and established the famed cod fishery on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. There was a brief period when optimism about northern resources resurfaced. However, what proved to be the fanciful discovery of gold (proven later to be iron pyrite, or fool's gold) by Martin Frobisher in the 1570s established the North's reputation as a fickle and unreliable area for development. The whalers were particularly eager to push into Arctic waters, discovering bountiful harvests to be made in the region.

Europeans also realized that the Subarctic and Arctic regions held great promise for the fur trade. Russian traders continued their slow eastward advance, encountering additional under-developed trapping and trading zones. In North America, beginning with the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670 and continuing for more than two centuries thereafter, traders made their way across the continent, exploring new regions and developing additional trading posts. By the 1840s, the first Hudson's Bay Company officials arrived in the Yukon River basin in Alaska, thus drawing the entire continent into the fur trade. The British traders, however, were not the first on the scene. A century earlier, Vitus Bering explored the coast of Alaska, discovering large herds of sea otters and leading the Russian American Fur Company to expand into the area. With the Russian and British arrival in Alaska, the history of the Russian North and that of the Western European expansion across North America came together.

The development of the fisheries, whaling, and the fur trade proved that the Subarctic and Arctic region held some wealth, if not the fantastic resources that the dreamers had hoped for. The initial exploration of these areas, however, sparked growing government interest in the region and led to a fascinating "race" to ensure control, or sovereignty, over the vast areas. The impetus of this race was the two-pronged search for a passage to the Far East. One branch, the largest, involved an extensive exploration of the Arctic Islands of North America in search of a Northwest Passage. The second, and smaller, element involved the search for a Northeast Passage, over the top of Russia. Both proved to be extremely difficult, claiming numerous lives and many ships, and forcing explorers and adventurers into dangerous multi-year journeys through the Arctic ice. By the 1840s (for North America) and the 1880s (for the Russian coastline), European explorers had demonstrated, geographically, that there were routes to both the East and the West. They had also proven that the passageways were extremely difficult, if not impossible, to navigate and had no demonstrable commercial potential. (Ironically, global warming in the early twenty-first century is extending the season of open navigation in the Arctic, improving the commercial viability of, in particular, the Northwest Passage across North America. This, in turn, has sparked a controversy about Canada's control of the Arctic waters.)

By the mid-nineteenth century, the search for the Northwest and Northeast Passages had become matters more of national pride than international commerce. The Arctic proved a vital testing ground for the navies and adventurers of various nations, particularly Great Britain, Norway, and Russia. The most important example of the relentless pursuit of the Arctic passageways came in the 1840s when famed Arctic explorer John Franklin became lost in the High Arctic. The resulting search for his ships or, as time passed, proof that he had reached the Central Arctic, brought numerous expeditions into the region, resulting in a rapid expansion in scientific knowledge of the northern regions.

In subsequent years, the North experienced a series of other intrusions and transformations. Missionaries came into the region in significant numbers: Protestants and Catholics in North

America, Russian Orthodox priests in Alaska and across Siberia, and Lutherans in Scandinavia. The priests sought to change the spiritual and cultural world of the Indigenous peoples, hoping that they would adopt Christian views and abandon what the newcomers saw as “uncivilized” ways. By the mid to late 1800s, government agents were also arriving in the northern regions. Across Russia, the officials and military representatives brought aggressive and oppressive regulations for the local populations, extracting sizeable taxes from them. The purchase of Alaska from Russia by the United States in 1867 brought military and government officials into the new territory. Canadian authorities moved more slowly, for they were struggling to tie together the newly formed Dominion of Canada and had more pressing commitments in the South. Across Scandinavia, the North had been administratively incorporated into southern state and political systems earlier than in other regions, and the Sami people were already feeling the effects of government policy.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also saw the rapid expansion of economic activity in northern regions. Prospectors and developers looked for viable mining properties across the region. Most famously, miners discovered large quantities of gold in the Yukon River basin in 1896, sparking the world-famous Klondike Gold Rush, which hastened the development of the Canadian North and neighbouring Alaska. Whalers, having exhausted available stocks in southern waters, pressed steadily to the North, eventually arriving in the rich whaling grounds off Herschel Island and the Mackenzie River delta in the 1880s and 1890s and, in the Eastern Arctic, exploiting the declining whale herds in that region. The treacherous waters off Norway and the Russian North attracted interest as well, as did the fishing grounds off the Faeroe Islands and Iceland. The North’s image as an unusable mass of ice-covered water and snow-swept lands was offset, in part, by the perception that the region had considerable commercial potential and was therefore worthy of development and government attention.

Indigenous Responses to Newcomers

The Indigenous peoples of the Circumpolar World experienced dramatic transitions as a consequence of the expansion of Europeans into their territories. The newcomers brought new material goods, including iron knives, manufactured clothing, metal pots, and the like, which the Aboriginal peoples found to be desirable and useful. They also brought epidemic diseases, which killed hundreds of people with frightening speed, for almost all the Indigenous populations had no natural immunity to the imported illnesses. Conflict was comparatively slight in the northern regions. The newcomers were startled and amazed by the adaptability of the northern Indigenous peoples and, perhaps most importantly, were only rarely covetous of their lands. There are countless stories of the Indigenous peoples saving European travelers from certain death in the Arctic winters and numerous examples of economic cooperation across the region.

Aboriginal people proved to be creative in their responses to the newcomers. The Inuit were among the most economically adaptable peoples encountered by Europeans during the age of exploration, accepting new technologies, responding to new commercial opportunities, and learning to coexist quite well with the newcomers. Across the vast Subarctic regions of North America (the Russian experience was different in many respects), Indigenous peoples reacted positively to the opportunities presented by the fur trade, which involved trading something they had in abundance (furs) for items that were otherwise unattainable in their area (manufactured goods). The long-standing idea that the Indigenous traders were routinely outsmarted by European traders simply does not stand up to close examination. The Aboriginal people proved to be adept traders, demanding and receiving fair return, as defined by themselves, for their furs. They similarly responded in a mixed fashion to the missionaries. They did not rashly accept the dictates of the new Christian faith. Instead, they maintained many of their traditions and values,

took selectively from the missionaries' lessons and messages, and sought to make Christianity relevant and suitable for their purposes (this idea is revisited in Module 8).

But they could not control all aspects of the expansionary age. Government officials and the military could, particularly in Siberia, be assertive and demanding, and they were difficult to ignore. The newcomers brought harmful commodities, including alcohol, along with their other trade goods. In some parts of the North, the liquor trade proved to be extremely disruptive and troubling. There was little that could be done to stop the destructive effects of epidemic disease. In many instances, huge portions (75 to 90 per cent in some cases) of the local population perished due to the introduction of a new illness. Smallpox was particularly devastating, killing hundreds of people each time it swept through an area. The economic values of the fur, fisheries, and other trades altered age-old relationships with land and resources, encouraging over-harvesting (particularly by the Europeans) and undermining or threatening local economies (this is discussed further in Module 7). And the more destructive sectors, including Arctic whaling and mining, left ecological scars in their wake, for the newcomers paid little attention to the protection of the environment upon which Indigenous societies depended.

The Colonial Era

The most rapid development of the Circumpolar World occurred in the twentieth century. In the first half of the century, newcomers expanded their mineral exploration and development activities, tested the northern limits of commercial agriculture and forestry, increased fishing activity, and greatly enhanced the role and activities of government. It was in this period (in some instances, particularly in Scandinavia and in Northwest Russia, the development of commerce came earlier), governments expanded schooling for Indigenous peoples, invested in major infrastructure projects (roads, railways, and telegraph lines), increased their military presence, and sought to incorporate the Northern areas more closely into the nation-states.

While southerners appeared to be taking the North regions more seriously, a solid streak of self-interest ran through the various activities. The North was no longer a curiosity, a place of unique Indigenous peoples (the Inuit had always attracted special interest and amazement), vast wilderness, and limited appeal to settlers. It had, in places as diverse as the river basins of Yakutia in Siberia and the gold fields around Fairbanks, Alaska and in the Russian Kolyma River basin, from the herding lands of Scandinavia to the oil fields of the Yamal region and along the Mackenzie River in Canada, proven to be of economic and hence political value. There were real, if hard-won, resources to be found in the North, and southern governments and developers were increasingly anxious to gain access to them.

Southern governments, however, had little interest in granting the North a great deal of say in the development and operation of the Subarctic and Arctic regions. Moscow ruled Siberia with an often iron fist. The United States, Scandinavia, Denmark (in the case of Greenland), and Canada operated more gently, but likewise with primary attention given to the role and value of the northern colonies to the nation as a whole. Even the United States, the bulwark of democracy, resisted Alaskan demands for greater autonomy and kept Alaska as a territory until 1959. In the case of the Yukon and Northwest Territories in Canada, the national government paid little attention to regional concerns, shrinking the size of the Yukon government in the 1920s and 1930s and managing the vast Northwest Territories from the nation's capital in Ottawa until well into the 1960s.

The onset of the Second World War brought even more dramatic changes. The United States rushed to defend Alaska—and to show the continent that the Japanese would be held at bay. They built a highway to Alaska (a rough road that was not a proper civilian highway until well after the war), developed the Mackenzie Valley oil fields for military purposes, and dispatched thousands of troops and military personnel to Alaska. The Americans also operated an extensive lend-lease program, ferrying numerous military planes and related supplies to the Russians through Alaska. The Russians resisted American offers to assist more directly with the war against the Germans, fearing that allowing the US soldiers into the USSR would cause considerable difficulty in the post-war period. Norway was invaded and occupied by the Germans and suffered severe dislocations. Sweden remained neutral but Finland was involved in the war. In Greenland and Iceland, the United States established important military operations as part of the Allied war effort as it had in Canada.

The more dramatic transformations, however, occurred after the Second World War. The onset of the Cold War between Russia and the United States (1947-1991) resulted in the rapid militarization of the Arctic and Subarctic. Complex radar lines were constructed across Alaska, northern Canada and Greenland to provide early warning of a Russian attack. Military bases were constructed throughout the region, particularly in Alaska where there was a rapid build-up of troops and supplies (which later played an important role in supplying the Vietnam War effort). American military bases in Iceland and Greenland played an important role in strategic defense. The Russians were just as active, building major facilities across the North, and preparing to defend their country against a possible American attack. The military operations sparked a great deal of economic activity and brought thousands of military personnel into the region, often outnumbering the Indigenous population by a sizeable amount.

Alongside the military build-up, there occurred an extremely rapid exploitation of northern resources. In the quarter century following the end of the Second World War, the nations of the Circumpolar world turned to their Arctic and Subarctic regions with enthusiasm. Governments sponsored major infrastructure developments in order to encourage economic activity. The construction of hydro-electric dams (the most elaborate proposed projects were not built) resulted in the diversion of vast quantities of water and significant ecological changes and sparked major Indigenous protests. Mining companies discovered an almost insatiable demand for the raw materials of the industrial age, and opened dozens of mines across the North. Improved exploration techniques enabled prospectors to reach little-known areas of the Subarctic and Arctic, resulting in significant commercial developments. Perhaps most importantly, the discovery of oil fields in northern Russia and Canada, and particularly in Alaska reawakened southern excitement about northern resources, convincing southerners and national governments that the North held the key to national prosperity. The resulting resource developments occurred without a great deal of regard for the northern ecology, especially in the Russian North, where the absence of environmental controls and regulations resulted in a contamination of vast tracts of land that will likely last for generations.

The rapid developments of the post-war period also brought national governments into the region. They became increasingly intrusive, particularly with Indigenous peoples. The 1950s and 1960s saw a great deal of effort placed on the education of Aboriginal children, particularly in residential and boarding schools, and efforts made to “improve” Indigenous life by moving them into villages and by providing alternatives to traditional harvesting lifestyles. The arrival of thousands of miners, soldiers, government officials, and others altered the social balance in much of the North. In many places, the Indigenous peoples became minorities in their homelands, outnumbered and overshadowed by the newcomers. The development of roads and airfields undercut the established riverboat transportation system, just as the expansion of radio and, in the

1970s, television service dramatically altered social patterns in the once-isolated communities in many countries. By the 1980s, most of the Circumpolar North had been substantially restructured, dominated by government (and the military), with non-Indigenous majorities, and with very interventionist government activities across the region.

Student Activity 3

Based on the outline above, identify at least five ways in which the period before 1900 differed from the period after 1900. Why do you think these two periods in the history of the Circumpolar World were so different?

Northern Efforts to Secure Autonomy and Self-Rule

Northerners have rarely been silent in the face of dramatic changes. Indigenous peoples have long protested—often with little national or international attention—the occupation of their lands and the destruction of their traditional resources. Non-Indigenous northerners had criticized government attention, or lack of attention, and sought more sensitive and relevant solutions to northern problems. In North America, most newcomers protested changed or unwelcome circumstances by leaving the area. Transience was among the most important characteristic of non-Aboriginal life in the North. In Scandinavia, Greenland, and Iceland (which did not endure the external control that characterized the rest of the North, see why in Module 12), more of the newcomers stayed and struggled for new and better solutions. Russia, particularly in the post-1917 period, operated under the stiff and often brutal controls of the Soviet system and regional residents had little chance to protest or effect changes. (The fact that Siberia was the home to most of the infamous Stalinist concentration camps solidified in the minds of Russians and many other peoples the image of the Russian North as a dangerous and frightening place.)

Demands for greater local control brought results, although often very slowly. Denmark was quite creative in its support of the Indigenous people of Greenland, and often responded reasonably to demands for improvements in service and approach. The northern regions of Sweden, Finland, and Norway had representation in national parliaments and, after the rise of Indigenous protests in the 1960s and 1970s, special steps were taken to give better political voice to Sami demands and perspectives (this is discussed in more detail in Module 11). Alaska struggled for many years with its territorial status, finally achieving statehood in 1959. In Canada, the Yukon and Northwest Territories received generous financial subsidies from the Canadian government, but had little political autonomy until the late 1970s. The subsequent creation of the territory of Nunavut (out of the Northwest Territories) in 1999 established an Indigenous dominated political jurisdiction and was part of a broader Canadian effort to grant greater autonomy to the territories. Russia, not surprisingly, was a very different case. During the last decades of the Soviet regime, the national government provided generous incentives to encourage settlement and development in Siberia. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and subsequent political and economic turmoil, the northern regions have experienced considerable political and administrative difficulty. The national government has taken steps to empower the republics and local governments, although movement has not always been swift or successful at either level (we will return to this in Module 12).

Perhaps the most successful and powerful development arising from the northern autonomy movements has been the emergence of a circumpolar identity (more on this in Module 13). The shared experiences of the past led to extensive political discussions about contemporary challenges and future opportunities. The Circumpolar movement gained particular strength when

the Inuit from across the North began to meet through the Inuit Circumpolar Conference. Regional and national governments followed suit, with the creation of the Arctic Council in 1996, and such initiatives as the University of the Arctic providing practical examples of the importance of collective Circumpolar action. The recognition that the North faces unique challenges in the areas of environmental change, Indigenous cultural survival, regional economic development, northern education, and responding to northern conditions has provided considerable impetus to the early political and administrative developments. A key element in sustaining and expanding the initiative is the understanding of the history of the Circumpolar World, a past that has elements that are shared and others that are unique to each region.

Student Activity 4

The primary purpose of studying history is to understand how and why a region, a country, or a people have been affected by change over time. It is not the intent of history to blame people or organizations for the changes that have occurred. Based on the material covered in this module, how has the understanding of the history of the Circumpolar World added to your understanding of each of the following. Give at least two comments for each area.

The contemporary condition of Indigenous communities

The current political battles for autonomy and self-rule

The state of the northern environment

Southern attitudes toward the North

Summary

The Circumpolar World exists as a physical reality, for there are profound similarities among the various regions covered by the Circumpolar label. The history of the area reveals that there are other commonalities, even though the various parts of the North developed with little contact with each other. The North has been characterized by a small Indigenous population, uniquely adapted to local circumstances and realities. Outsiders have, across the globe, viewed the region primarily in one of two ways: as a vast wasteland of little value or interest, or as a treasure trove available to be exploited for the benefit of the South. History has shown, as biologists also know, that the northern ecosystem is very fragile, vulnerable to over-harvesting of resources or misuse of the delicate environment. The scars of historical over-development remain clearly in evidence across the region. There is a pattern, too, of northern response to southern influences, in the form of protests, creative adaptations to new circumstances, and demands for greater involvement in future decisions. That the Circumpolar regions share a great deal in common should not hide the fact that there are numerous differences as well. The development of Siberia does not parallel that of Alaska. Iceland's history is radically different from that of the Yukon, and Norway followed a very different path than did northern Quebec. A deeper understanding of the history of the North would focus more on the unique personalities, circumstances, and events that gave each sub-region of the Circumpolar World its unique identity. At this point, it is important to recognize that national differences cannot obscure the reality that there are significant trends and patterns in the history of the Circumpolar World that should be recognized.

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Glossary of Terms

■ **Adaptation:** adjusting to new environment or conditions.

■ **Ecology:** The relationship between organisms and their environment, or the study of the detrimental effects of modern civilization on the environment, with a view toward prevention or reversal through conservation.

■ **Bering Land Bridge:** A small strip of land that joined North America and Asia during the last ice age, 80,000 to 12,000 years ago. Huge sheets of ice built up in the ice ages, and covered large areas of the earth. With so much of Earth's water frozen on land, the sea levels fell by about 130 metres. This uncovered a land bridge. The ancestors of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas probably crossed this land to come to North America.¹

■ **Missionary:** One who is sent on a mission, especially one sent to do religious or charitable work in a territory or foreign country.

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