

Svalbardianers

Questioning the consistency of an Arctic community

Arctic Anthropology (M2AS311)

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Introduction

Most well-known images of Svalbard are those of magnificent landscapes made of mountains and ice, stunning views of pristine nature in which the only position suitable for a human being seems to be that of a lone contemplative observer — the other side of the manly adventurer able to survive in a nonetheless hostile environment. This depiction of Svalbard as a heaven of pure nature and a paradise for icons of wilderness — such as the polar bears — is actually

itself a construct, fostered by touristic brochures, visitors' accounts, and other cultural objects. Of course it is not a false account of what Svalbard may be, but it is a partial representation. This archipelago known as the northernmost inhabited territory on Earth also consists in the people living there. However, Svalbard, placed under Norway sovereignty, is rarely considered as a proper society. The term "Svalbardianer" itself is of utmost rarity — and "Svalbardian" hardly ever used other than as an adjective. The only occurrence found of "Svalbardianer" in scientific and grey literature is in the title of a 2013 post from anthropologist Anna Stammler-Gossmann [21], who borrowed the term from an interviewee during fieldwork in Svalbard's Norwegian main town and administrative capital, Longyearbyen. This basic fact actually raises a profound question: that of the very existence of something like a society proper to Svalbard.

Svalbard is a peculiar settlement in that it has no "indigenous" population: it has never been inhabited in the long run on a self-sufficiency basis. People living on Svalbard have always depended on supply from the outside — whether they were European sailors settling on the shores on a seasonal basis, Pomor trappers inhabiting Svalbard on a yearly basis, current Russia or Norwegian minors and civil servants, or tourists from abroad importing most of their consumption products from their mainland countries. Still today, theoretically, people cannot be born on Svalbard and cannot die there — the archipelago having no maternity hospital, no retirement home, and very limited medical facilities in general. No one is a Svalbard native, and as Grydehøj puts it, "people cannot even plan on living out their lives in Longyearbyen" [7]. Life on Svalbard has always been conceived as temporary, seemingly preventing people from building up strong long-term attachment to the place, intense social links and collective memory which would be transmitted from a generation to the other in order to build up a strong social group. One of the main points of this essay is to examine the potential nature of such a group; here a minimal definition can already be given: an aggregation of interlinked individuals having in common a set of representations, values and practices, that is, social patterns making up a stable structure in which each individual has a certain role.

I will question the existence of something like a proper Svalbardian social group through history, looking at the patterns of the groups which settled the archipelago, at the institutions which framed the living on Svalbard and the potential feelings of belonging which may have tied Svalbardianers to the place or to the community itself. I will also have a look at the cultural representations of what the life on Svalbard is, among Svalbardianers but also elsewhere, since the potential existence of a society *in collective representations* is in itself noteworthy, and for it may actually perform social bonds between the people who are assigned such a collective identity. I deem it to be relevant to raise this question at an anthropological level rather than a purely sociological one — even though these categories may be considered a matter of conventions — for three reasons. First is the requirement to take into account the historical depth of the subject, a point often disregarded in sociological works. Second is the necessity to lead a kind of comparative analysis, or at least to adopt a broad viewpoint regarding the possible plurality of communities on Svalbard. Indeed, several different places on the

archipelago have been settled, at different times in history, and sometimes independently and on the request of different institutions. Third contribution, anthropology may help focusing on the link between humans and their natural environment, which is essential to understand the settling of Svalbard and the form of collective life which have emerged in such a constraining environment.

I discuss it with three main points, articulated around a crucial date, that of 1975 — when the Longyearbyen airport was built. This was a turning point in the history of Svalbard settlement since it highly reduced the isolation of the archipelago and thus the framework of Svalbard living, and it made it possible for tourism to develop on a large scale, thus launching what seems now to have been a major economic and social shift in recent years for Svalbard.

- (i) First point, Svalbard has long been an area on which communities of people of the same nationality only settled temporarily and on a utilitarian basis. Their living on Svalbard was extremely constrained by both the natural environment and their home countries' administrations and/ or companies. This was especially true before 1975 — even though realities happening on a four-century span are of course contrasted. Svalbardianers may then be thought of as temporary occupiers of a specific space.
- (ii) Second, I will focus on the changes induced by the opening of the airport and the long-lasting shift which is still occurring, that of a transition from extractive industry to tourism as the archipelago's main industry. There is an opening and an internationalization of Svalbard and especially Longyearbyen, which become integrated in international networks of all kinds, and at the same time gaining more autonomy. Svalbardianers therefore seem to be tending towards the formation of a coherent proper group.
- (iii) Thirdly, I will focus on the construction of a Svalbardian proper identity, suggesting the "Svalbardianer" to be not only someone residing on Svalbard, but someone embracing a specific identity. There is a "sense of belonging" sustained by a growing sense of place. It is expanding since 1975, at a time when tourism and ecological stakes help securing both a proper history and a particular geography of the archipelago, thus framing what may be called a Svalbardian cultural landscape. It is clearly backed by common images of Svalbard, revived by tourism industry, and reinvested with meaning at a time when the very sense of living of Svalbard is changing, though certain characteristics do remain the same.

1 Svalbardianers through the ages: a collection of national communities

Svalbard archipelago has long been seen as a vast deposit of resources. Those resources were whales at first, hunted on a massive scale along the XVIIth century; furs and other land animal products, hunted and trapped until 1850; and then extractable resources, that is coal mainly, from the end of the XIXth century until today, with petroleum and industrial mining

resources having been added to the list during the last decades. This paved the way for the settling on Svalbard by foreign groups of hunters, trappers, of minors, on a temporary basis. This living on Svalbard is highly constrained by the environment and controlled by institutions (since exploiting communities never were self-sufficient).

1.1 Whaling, hunting, trapping, and the Arctic folklore of foreign crews

An exceptional biome

Chapter 9 of McGhee’s book [19] deals with Svalbard archipelago, and it begins with a vivid description of the environmental conditions which make it surprisingly possible for an extraordinary biome to develop in such a remote and *a priori* hostile zone.

The archipelago is the arrival point of a branch of the Gulf Stream, that is, a current of warm and salted tropical water which runs through the whole length of North Atlantic Ocean (cf. fig.1). When it meets the ice cap and ice-cold water descending from the polar ocean, exceptional conditions (oxygenation of the water, releasing of algae, etc.) help plankton and krill develop, and those organisms’ predators as well, and so forth for the whole food chain. At the top of it are marine mammals, that is, walruses, seals and of course whales of all kinds. It also makes it a favorable environment for all types of migrating birds, and on land, reindeers, foxes and polar bears. On top of this, the washing of Svalbard coasts by warm waters also guarantees an easy access to its shores and fjords, unexpected at such high latitude.

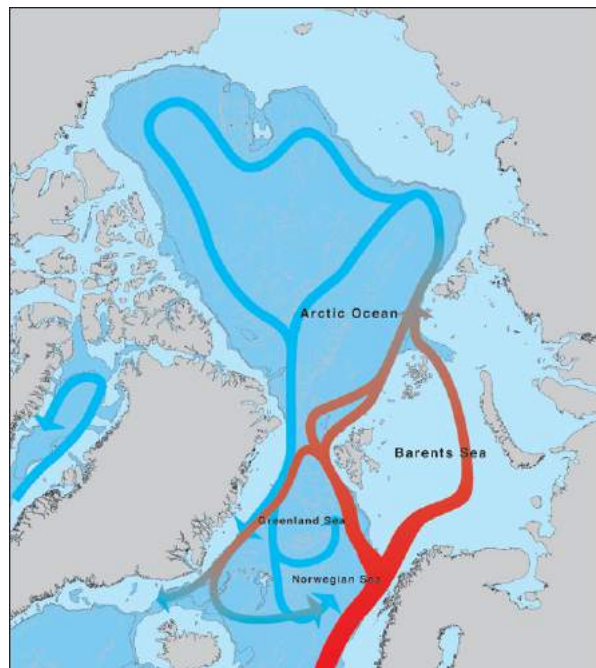


Figure 1: The Gulf Stream carrying warm Atlantic water (red) moves northwards, encircling Svalbard, and cools down. After circulating in the North Polar Basin, the now cold, Arctic water (blue) leaves the Arctic Ocean. Source: [30]

XVIIth century whaling industry: national crews and towns

All along the XVIIth century, Western European crews would come to Svalbard in summer to catch whales, which oil was one of the most cost-efficient good a European entrepreneur could find. The right whale was a favourite prey, since once harpooned and dead, it floated on the water and therefore could easily be dragged up the shore, where its blubber was boiled (the process is called trying out) in order to obtain the valued oil. Fleet-owning companies were created in many ports in England, the Netherlands, France, Norway and Denmark, often supported by local and national authorities. At the end of the XVIIth century, the number

of boats and sailors peaked at around 250 boats and 11000 men — this intensive hunting leading to such a depletion of the number of right whales the industry ceased in the 1790’s. Every company built small temporary cities on the shores of Svalbard’s islands, next to natural harbours. These “towns” were actually mere villages, consisting only in a few basic whaling facilities — that is, big ovens for boiling whales’ blubber, warehouses, sometimes a smithy. They were abandoned at the end of the season. The best well-known example of that is a Dutch “city” founded in 1619 on Amsterdam Island, Smeerenburg — “whale blubber city”. It is interesting for our subject in that it led to one of the most famous and enduring myth about Svalbard: that of a paradise city, with a bright and vivid urban life, close to the North Pole, surrounded by waters well-stocked with fish. Explorers and travelers compared it with a European city, occupied by thousands of people, with horses, great-scale whaling industry facilities, and all entertaining places which could then be found in a European urban centre — taverns, gambling places, brothels. Even though contemporary archaeologists estimate that no more than 200 men lived in Smeerenburg (and only traces of most utilitarian facilities were found), depictions of this myth still exist in the paintings of the time, cf. fig. 2.



Figure 2: “The train oil cookery of the Amsterdam chamber of the Northern Company at Smeerenburg”, Cornelis de Man (1639). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

On the account of sailors’ journals, the “city life” in Svalbard was rather exhausting, frightening, and permanently plagued by the pestilential smell of whale flesh burning and rotting. These towns were abandoned by the mid-XVIIth century, once the technique of onboard-trying out was known. This technique was imported by Basque whalers embarked on French boats. The diffusion of such a technique proves that there were links between the whaling companies — whether crews meeting and spying on each other in Svalbard, or Basque whalers being hired away from a company to the other between two whaling seasons. These networks and the existence of a shared representation of what the life in Svalbard was seem to form the beginnings of not a society, but at least a shared experience and set of common representations of Svalbard.

XVIIIth century Pomor trappers: the first Svalbardianers?

From the beginning of the XVIIIth century on, Pomor trappers, coming from Russian White Sea shores, began exploiting Svalbard's fauna. A typical Pomor expedition consisted of crews of two or three getting landed on Svalbard in late spring, and getting picked up on year later. Pomor trappers were often selected among “dynasties” of Svalbardian trappers by Old Believer monasteries financing the expeditions. In summer, the Pomors would hunt, build a log cabin and collect driftwood for heating, while in winter, trappers would regularly check their traps, collect furs (from foxes, reindeers or bears) and maybe try out oil if they catch a walrus or a seal. Meanwhile, they paid visits to other cabins; chessboards were found in the remnant of the cabins. Among other elements, these social interactions may indicate the beginnings of a proper Svalbardian community, which would follow from environmental conditions — that of long winters when hunting and trapping, could not be the sole activity — and from the social organization of those winterings, since all trappers had the same socio-cultural origin and religion. Cemeteries found close to the inhabited areas also prove the relatively intense social life which may have been facilitated by the common Old Believer faith.

Specific behaviors emerged, as the collecting and consuming of local *Cochlearia* in order to avoid scurvy. The fear of scurvy, associated with the long Winter vigils, led to what McGhee [19] characterizes as the first *folklore* proper to Svalbard: scurvy was represented as an old witch luring trappers into sleep. McGhee also evokes the myth of the “Spitzberg Dog”, a huge monster responsible for bad weather but which may lead the hunters to reindeers. Specific funerary rituals were also elaborated in order to adapt to specific environmental conditions: as in the European “blubber towns”, most corpses could not be buried in the ground for this frozen ground was too difficult to dig, and therefore were buried under a pile of stones. All these practices, as well as the knowledge gradually accumulated, were transmitted from a generation to the other in Pomor families and seem to constitute Svalbardian traditions — of course including a large part of proper Pomor patterns, especially the skills acquired through the centurial experience of living in Russian High Arctic. Thus the living on Svalbard is a variation on a strong cultural and national preexisting pattern, acculturated the archipelago's specific environment.

1.2 The modern settling of Svalbard on a national basis

Mining towns and populations controlled by mainland countries

From the beginning of the XXth century, there was a rush for Svalbard's coal reserves. Companies from Northern Europe, Russia (then USSR) and the USA opened mines and built towns next to them. Companies brought miners from their home countries and (re)named the places — thus the Dutch settled and named Barentsburg after the Dutch explorer who officially discovered the archipelago. All along the first three-quarters of the XXth century, there was not much “a” Svalbardian community as several local communities living independently the

one from the other, all extremely dependent from their respective home countries. The very settlement of the island depended on national politics, since maintaining mining activities on Svalbard has proved consistently in deficit for most of the second half of the XXth century, but Norway and Russia/ USSR nevertheless kept mining and sustained permanent settlements for diplomatic reasons. Indeed, after WWI, Soviet mines were a way for the regime to secure its presence on a strategically-located archipelago, and Norway maintained activities in order to secure its sovereignty. Mining towns on Svalbard were characterized in part by the control exercised over them. As Grydehøj et al. put it [8],

“Svalbard’s jurisdictional status has inspired unique community-level policy solutions. Until recently, all settlements in Svalbard were company towns. The companies that ran them had de facto control over their populations (who lived there, what work they did, what goods they could purchase, etc.).”

These social groups were specific, having no self-governance capacity. In another article, Grydehøj ([7]) quotes a telling passage from Evjen [2001] who goes as far as to write that “there was not much of a community to develop either: it was more or less a workplace”.

This is a thesis Evjen developed in a 1994 article: “An Arctic society — a laboratory: Longyearbyen, Svalbard, 1916–75”. His thesis is that Longyearbyen society was so controlled by *Store Norske*, the mining company, that it was more a “laboratory” than a local community. This control was visible on several accounts. Recruitment was operated by *Store Norske*, which had a say on who was coming on not to Svalbard, since it chartered the only boats and owned all the houses (and the whole valley actually). It ran the only school, the only shop in Longyearben, providing all provisions (which were imported from mainland), and until 1980, it emitted a specific money for the town. It also controlled the composition of the community through concluding only seasonal contracts: unsatisfied or unsatisfying workers did not stay more than a year on the archipelago. On the other hand, high pay was a way to prevent protest movements. Things have changed a lot in Longyearbyen since 1975, but most of these elements remain true today for Barentsburg, the Russian settlement, with a uniquely Russian and Ukrainian population and a specific money issued by *Arktikugol* company.

Transience and turn-over hindering a sense of belonging

As mentioned in the introduction, Svalbard is no place for being born, nor for dying or even ageing. Even if this may also be changing, for long there was only the very basic facilities meant to guarantee the workers could spend a year working at the mine. There was no perspective of long-term settling on Svalbard, and it was not possible for blue-collar workers to make their families come live in the archipelago. Thus living on Svalbard was — and to some extent still is — necessarily considered temporary. Evjen states that “Longyearbyen was nobody’s domicile”, as miners’ “home” was where their family and house was, that is, on mainland. Longyearbyen did not allow for a personal identification or making life projects. Grydehøj in 2010 [7] translates a passage from Holm [2001], expressing what is deemed to be a common feeling on Svalbard:

Do we know who we are? Of course not, except that we are just visiting, that the situation is temporary, that no matter how happily life is described in questionnaires, it is nevertheless a life in transit. A life where the question of when you are going to travel back south is just as everyday as a child's question of what's for dinner. ... Longyearbyen is not a permanent place.

Today still, Svalbard population is transient and far younger than on mainlands (cf. fig.3). In 2008, the town's annual population turnover rate was 23%, which means that one person out of 4 residents would have left the archipelago within a year.

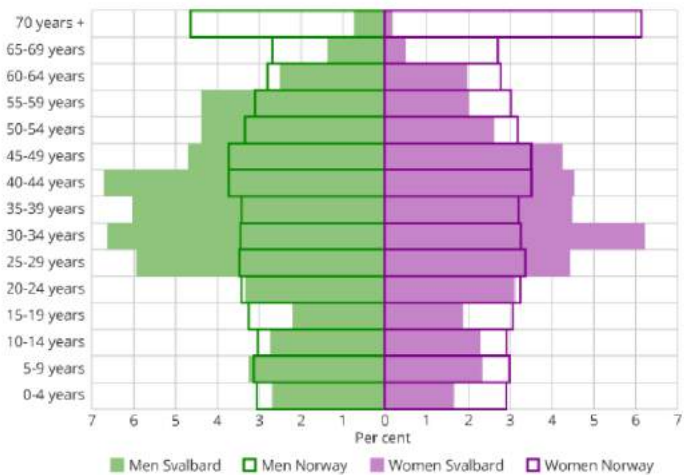
The high turnover rate confirms that Svalbardians probably do not plan on living forever on the island. This might impact the social bonds formed there. The community on Svalbard is — and is perceived as — transitory, evanescent. The relatively low number of old people may also have — or at least have had — an important effect on collective memory¹. Elderlies are often the depositaries of this collective memory, guaranteeing a certain anchorage of collective values and representations, and a certain permanence of the ideas, the souvenirs and the behaviors — even though

beliefs and practices of course evolve along social change and history, they often have a certain inertia making them the basis for future representations and behaviors. On Svalbard, the rhythm of population renewal was not the long period a generation lasts, but that of a year. This hinders the perpetuation of socio-cultural patterns and therefore the historical consistency of something like a stable society — that is, a strongly structured community of people. Small communities, that is, groups of people with social properties, material living conditions and representations in common, have existed on Svalbard for the whole XXth century, but until 1975, they seem to have been only functioning on a short-term basis. The emergence of a proper Svalbardian society was also impaired by the diplomatic rivalry between Norway and USSR. Grydehøj et al. explain that the interactions between residents of the two countries' settlement “was managed and was viewed with suspicion by the settlements' respective government authorities” [8], thus preventing the development of a sense of belonging beyond the communities' national frontiers.

Inside these mining communities, workers nevertheless developed some bonds. The period they went on Svalbard often passed the season; Evjen [5] underlines that the same individuals

¹See the seminal works of M. Halbwachs [12] on the critical importance of collective memory for the consistency of a society.

Population in the Norwegian settlements of Svalbard, by sex and age.



Source: Statistics Norway.

Figure 3: The age pyramid in Longyearbyen, compared to that in mainland Norway, 1th July 2015. One notes how younger the Svalbardians are, on the average, especially with more people aged 25-45 and less people older than 60.

kept coming back, often one year out of three or two. Miners what he calls “Polar sickness”: the fascination and attachment to the place. Social bonds could also be pursued on mainland, people seeing each other once back in Norway — this being facilitated by the fact that most Svalbardians in Norwegian settlements come from the same rural area in North Norway.

2 Internationalization and increasing autonomy of a shared territory

Many things have changed in the last decades. The opening of a regular airport in 1975 was both a cause of several changes and a sign of underlying strong trends of internationalization and gaining of autonomy — especially for Longyearbyen. This paved the way for the building of both a more integrated and more diversified community in a context of globalization. This is precisely what is encapsulated in the title of the article from Grydehøj et al. [8], linking “the globalization of the Arctic” with “the building [of] communities in Svalbard”.

2.1 An enhancement of local democracy and relative autonomy

Strict control of the communities has diminished since the 1970’s. A combination of factors led to this losing of influence of *Store Norske* and of Norway’s government for the benefit of Svalbard’s Governor. Financial difficulties led the Norwegian State’s to take over the company between 1970 (taking over the school) and 1976 (buying all private shares), and the Governor inherited most responsibilities. In 1980, local specific money was abandoned. Banking activities, children nursery, hairdresser set up in Longyearbyen. Local administration claimed for enhanced autonomy, which it was granted in 2002 with the creation of the Longyearbyen Community Council. It is now responsible for most aspects of the living there: infrastructures, social and economic planning and policies, etc., and since 2007, it runs the school. Norway’s government put the local governor in charge of “policing, environmental protection, notarial duties, travel and tourism coordination, public information, transport, and contact with foreign settlements in Svalbard”, which had to be accompanied by an “effective enforcement of Norwegian sovereignty, especially towards foreign agents on the archipelago” [Government of Norway, 1999, quoted in [8], p.102]. Therefore this liberalization from the State tutelage on the Norwegian settlements also meant an enhanced integration at the archipelago’s level, sovereign Norway calling for a better coordination, that is, an enhanced control of Svalbard Norwegian authorities on Russian settlements. However, there was a shift in the very nature of this control, now locally based.

All this went hand-in-hand with an economic diversification of the archipelago. Above-mentioned service industries develop, as well as scientific activities in different places on the archipelago. Last major trend was the development of tourism, on which I will come back later. Even though this diversification and gaining of autonomy does not mean that a proper society emerged on Svalbard — least an independent one, Longyearbyen being still subsidized by the

Norwegian state —, this institutional autonomous development made possible the development of local specific social organization patterns.

2.2 Is Svalbard becoming an international community?

Science provide a good example of not only economic diversification, but also of the internationalization of the activities on Svalbard. Norwegian settlement Ny-Ålesund is dedicated to scientific research and since the early 1990's, research bases have been gradually opened by more than a dozen of countries. Thus Svalbard is getting more and more integrated in international networks of all kind as a proper entity. First major landmark was the opening of the airport and the subsequent inclusion of Svalbard in regular air traffic routes. The archipelago was equipped with a phone line in 1978; with TV in 1984; and in 2003, it was connected with internet fibre 2003. Another example is that of UNIS, a University Center on Svalbard, which is part of a transnational polar educational network.

This made possible the emergence of something like an international community. While mining towns were organized on a strictly national basis (or Soviet basis for USSR ones), Longyearbyen nowadays hosts 500 non-Norwegian people from more than 40 countries — that is, a mere quarter of its population. Stammner-Gossmann thus recalls that in a few weeks in Svalbard she encountered people from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Russia, Thailand, the Philippines, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Armenia, Italia, Switzerland, Portugal and Japan. This trend of Svalbardians getting more and more diversified in their origins might help shape a community consciousness: that of belonging to a “special” group, characterised by its obvious diversity. A specific case is worth mentioning: the high number of Thai people living in Longyearbyen, which seems to be a feature distinguishing Svalbard's community. When the airport opened, many Thai women came to Svalbard (the only place in Europe where they needed no visa) to marry Norwegian workers. Through social networks, they encouraged Thai workers to emigrate to Svalbard, where jobs were available. However, Jensen [14] states that Thai women's social world is a world apart in Longyearbyen, hold back by the language difference and their confinement to the invisible sphere of domestic work. The internationalization of Svalbardians may also leave some of them on the margins.

2.3 The development of tourism: a economic and social shift

As earlier mentioned with the gaining of autonomy, bonds between Norwegian and Russian Svalbardians have strengthened in the last decades, and not only through the increased power of the Norwegian governor over Russian settlements. There are more and more interactions between Norwegians and Russians (and Ukrainians), through research but also tourism. Norwegian tourists visit Barentsburg settlement and other Russian and ex-Soviet zones, as many tourists do after visiting Longyearbyen. There are now regular trips between the two towns, wether by snowmobile or boat. Tourism represents an economic shift — detaching Svalbard from its dependency on an extractive mono-activity to a more open pool of activities

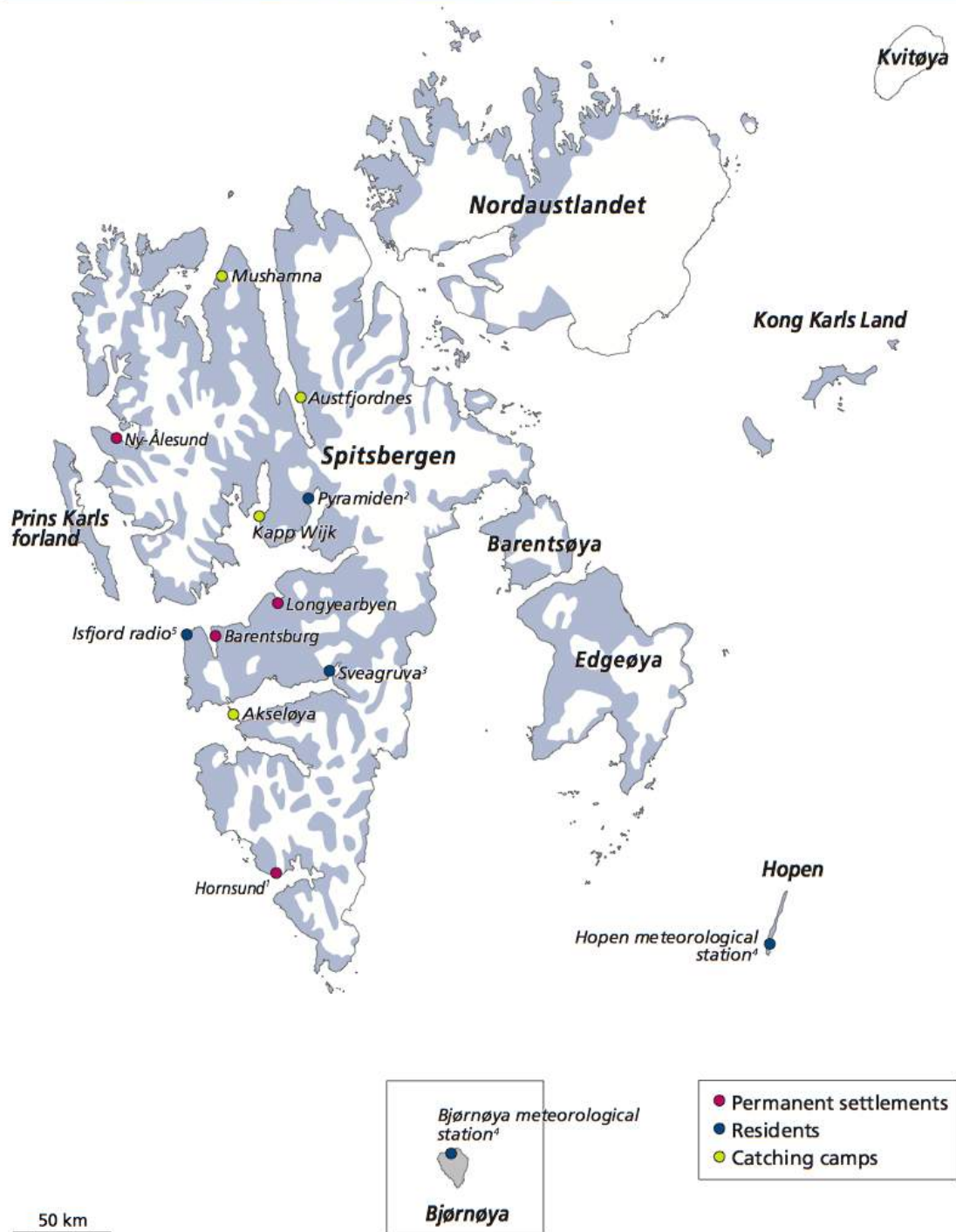
such as accommodation and dining, leisure and shopping, which makes it possible for a more diverse society to settle on the archipelago. The transition from industry to tourism (research and governance, the two other main activities on Svalbard, present less fluctuations) is also a proper social and cultural phenomena, likely to have consequences in terms of community building as well as on economic and natural systems.

Tourism on Svalbard boomed in the last two decades — Viken going as far as to say that “in the period from 1990 to 2010, Longyearbyen was more or less transformed into a tourist resort” ([25], p.338). The 1975 airport played a major role by triggering off this huge-scale tourism (relatively to the number of Svalbard inhabitants), but tourism growth is also conveyed by an increasing number of cruise ships visiting Svalbard’s shores. Grenier [6] recalls that this was part of a larger trend, that of global ecological awareness which fed nature tourism. Along with tourism booming, there was a change in the mentality of the people living on Svalbard towards tourists. Tourism is now seen as a promising industry, guaranteeing future economic activity, while it was rather seen as an evil in the 1990s. Umbreit [23] highlights this, mentioning the fact that in 1986 Longyearbyen’s campsite was set up 5km away from the town, people saying that it was to keep the tourists out of Longyearbyen, and the governor promised to keep the tourists numbers small. This shows that a certain sense of community — of having something in common — existed at the time — though this sense of belonging may have emerged precisely against the “threat” tourism was considered to be. This suspicion against tourists exhibits the existence of a Svalbardian “us” opposed to a tourist “they”.

2.4 The sharing of the territory

Significant changes have occurred in Svalbard since the 1970’s — economic as well as social, cultural, and political. More than a land used by individuals only forming groups on a versatile basis, recent shifts seem to make Svalbard a territory with its proper organization and significance, and shared by interlinked communities — for instance the Nowegians of Longyearbyen, the Russians and Ukrainians of Barentsburg, and the international community of Ny-Ålesund. The term “sharing”, though, is not unequivocal. Svalbardianers may “share out” the archipelago’s resources among themselves, each one using a part for its own usage. But they may also “share” some elements in the sense that they have it in common. These elements are the ones building a identity proper to the Svalbardianers. It seems that space is more and more shared, not in the sense of “divided between autonomous uses” anymore — which may be the basic definition of a territory: space appropriate to, and appropriated for, a certain use — but rather in the sense that many actors invest the same place with their uses and representations. The growing diversity of Longyearbyen’s population in terms of origins as well as of economic function highlights it. Towns’ economic activities have become increasingly diversified; mines now often welcome tourists; hunting grounds are also considered as enjoyable natural landscapes, etc. Sharing of settlements is contrained by the aforesaid trends as well as environmental constraints. The whole archipelago is remote, and no basic facilities exist

Settlements, residents and catching camps



Map data: Norwegian Polar Research Institute
 Data source: The Governor of Svalbard

- ¹ A permanent staff of 8 academic employees. As far as 50 in summertime.
- ² Abandoned in 1998.
- ³ There are continuous commuters from Longyearbyen, but no permanent inhabitants.
- ⁴ Consists of meteorological staff.
- ⁵ Partly served in connection with tourists visiting.

Figure 4

outside the settlements. The building of the airport has entrenched the social and geographical structure of the place and the imbalanced repartition of activities. Figure 4 p.12 displays the repartition of settlements on the archipelago. It is structured around the main Longyearbyen–Barentsburg hub, which is the entrance door for the archipelago (thanks to the port and the airport) as well as its demographic and political heart. Remote stations are often designed for temporary residents, and the furthest ones are catching camps not occupied on a regular basis, which intrinsically need to be far away from settlements.

This raises the question of the status of the natural environment. Sea, snowdrifts, mountains, landscapes on Svalbard cannot be bought or occupied, since the greatest part of the archipelago is protected. However, while Grydehøj et al. speak of the archipelago “simultaneously belonging to everyone and to no one” [8], I think it is important now to focus on the extent in which natural resources belong to everyone on Svalbard rather than to no one. They constitute the frame for a meaningful cultural landscape, backing up the collective self-representation of a svalbardian community, and they are a part of Svalbardians’ identity.

3 The building of a Svalbardian identity

In humanities, the question of “identity” is a tricky one. Here, many elements have come to serve an *identification* of Svalbardians the ones to the other and to the place and its specific characteristics. I will focus first on the construction of a common cultural landscape, at the crossroads of culture and nature and the appropriation of a common history; then on the image to which Svalbardians may or may not identify themselves; and last on what may be called a “sense of belonging” to the Svalbardians’ community.

3.1 Heritage and conservation: the construction of a cultural landscape

Polar tourism grew along with environmental awareness on a global level, which fed major conservation policies around the globe. Once again, it is at the beginning of the 1970’s that major moves were made on Svalbard, namely the creation of reserves and protection areas in 1973. Today, most of the archipelago’s natural spaces are protected in some way (see fig. 5, p.15), and cultural conservation ought not to be forgotten either. A peculiar policy is indeed enforced on Svalbard: any cultural remnant, any artifact or other trace of human activity dating prior to 1946 is automatically protected. This has led to an important number of places being protected (see Hagen et al., [10], and the listing table in annex, tab.8, p.22). Protecting places does not entail their fixing or congealing. Most protected natural areas on Svalbard may still be visited, and on several ones, hunting is allowed. Protected objects may also be visited and studied. But more importantly, those elements acquire a certain meaning once protected. Collective representations in and about Svalbard are built on natural landscapes as well as *heritage* objects. As Grydehøj ([7] puts it, “heritage production is a historical

process that creates and maintains ownership over a particular past”, and this ownership is collective. Protected areas and items become part of what is literally *common* and supports community-building. This is what Roura ([20]) means with his heritage definition:

“that part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes, whether they be economic or cultural (including political and social factors) and choose to bequeath to a future.”

I have underlined how transient Svalbard community may be, but through this process of conservation, a memory is collected. Past elements are put into a longer historical process of identification helped by the projection of a stable future, since traces of the past will remain. This is why Taylor states that the concept of heritage is “inextricably linked to notions of identity and continuity, to private and public memories, to sense of place” [22]. The conservation trend and thus the building of a Svalbardian identity is helped by the development of tourism, giving protected objects an economic value on top of a social one.

The meaning of conservation for locals as well as tourists is exemplified by Svalbard’s museum, in Longyearbyen. In her 1994 article, Hagevik [11] explains that it is a peculiar museum in that locals do not come to the museum to contemplate their past, but to discover it, since most information is totally new for — even local — visitors. She also stresses the fact that strong links have been developed with local school, making children more knowledgeable about Svalbard’s history than their parents. This highlights the fact that memory and more generally history is currently being constructed on Svalbard. This is part of what Grydehøj et al. deem to be “local government’s priorities of promoting the community [...] outside of central government control” [8]. The very fact that local government had been taking over schooling is determining in the institutional elaboration of a community — by promoting local socialization of the children. The official “This is Svalbard” guide [29] states that the school developed local curricula, emphasizing Arctic and Svalbard’s peculiarities, thus giving all children in Svalbard a sense of their uniqueness. This trend suggests that all policies of cultural heritage conservation may to some extent be considered part of a “museification” process, aimed at promoting a sense of community among Svalbardians, through a shared knowledge of history — which could otherwise not be retained because of the society’s transience.

Cultural landscapes are “at the interface of nature and culture” ([22]); they are all the elements serving as objects of identification for a social group. However, cultural landscapes never exist only for a limited number of individuals; they are part of wider representations, and thus may be invested with different interplaying meanings. This is what I want to focus on next: the image of Svalbard and its inhabitants which may exist around the world and interacts with Svalbardians’ self-definition.

Svalbard. Protected areas and biogeographical zones. 2005

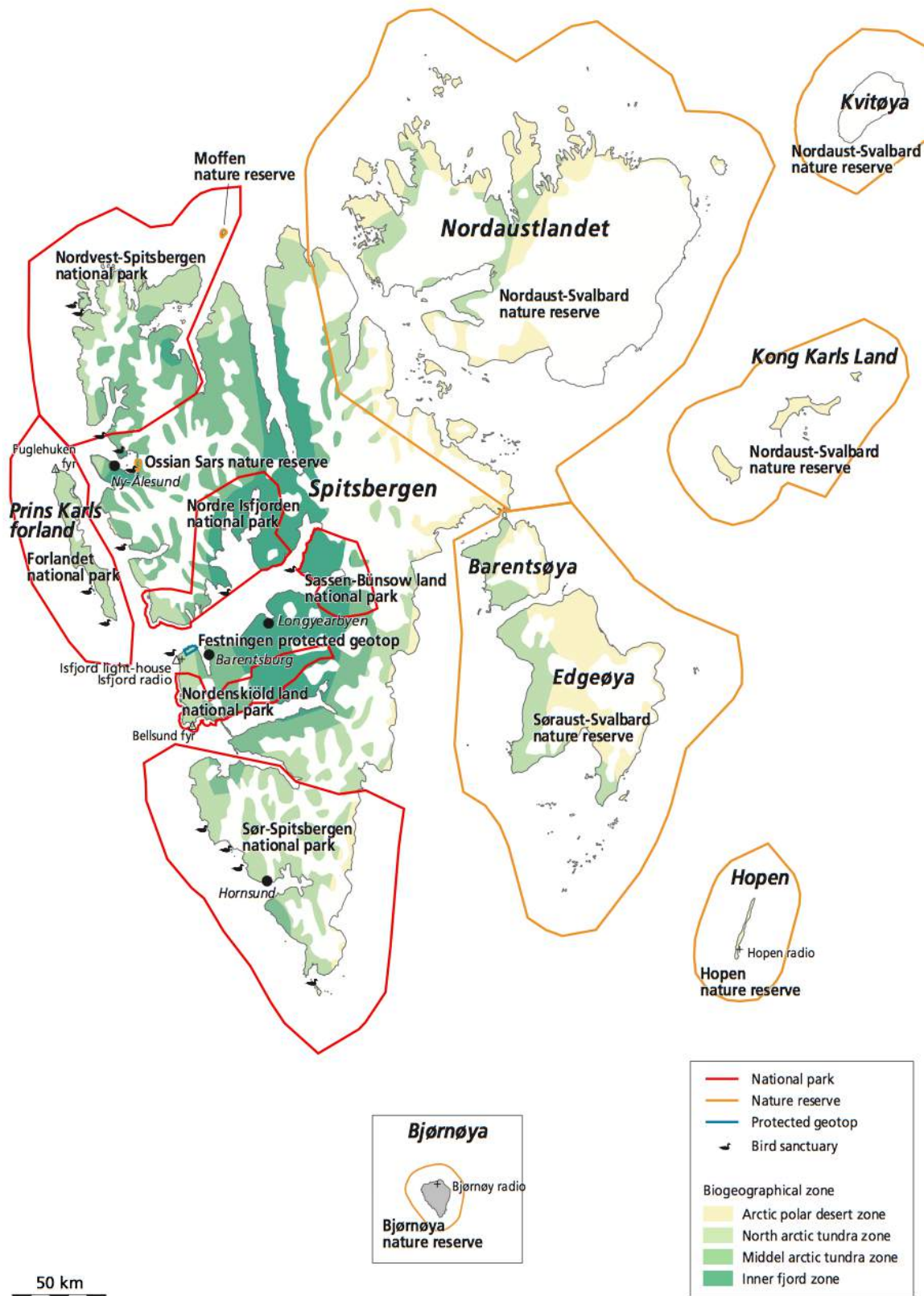


Figure 5: Many area on Svalbard have been turned into reserves and protection areas — though under various statuses entailing various constraints.

3.2 The power of images: myths and symbols in Svalbard community-building

An important element entailed by the growth of tourism industry is the massive diffusion of certain representations of the life on Svalbard. Websites advertising for tours around the archipelago always present the classic image of a pristine and magnificent but hostile landscape mentioned in introduction. Marketing for tourism on Svalbard aims at making the tourists feel like adventurers traveling on the northern edge of the world in order to experience pure roughness. Encompassing it the best is the very symbol of Svalbard: the iconic polar bear, which presence on the archipelago helps making Svalbard seen as the last refuge for wilderness — through touristic brochures as well as fiction, see for instance the representation of Svalbard as a polar bear kingdom in Phillip Pullman’s *His Dark materials*.



Figure 6: The oft-photographed polar bear (reading “this applies on whole Svalbard”) sign in Longyearbyen, recalling tourists their real and mythified closeness to wilderness’ dangers.

The hegemonic vision of Svalbard which is promoted is that of a continuous history of heroic exploration, Svalbardianers being brave miners, fierce hunters, ruthless trappers or rough explorers, but anyway supermen which have to fight dramatic natural conditions for survival. To that extent, representations of Svalbard match the typical representations of the Arctic, apart from the — often cliché — image of indigenous people. Life on Svalbard is thought to be rough and masculine, selecting heroes which are rewarded by living in the purest natural environment. Stammer-Gossmann also shows that such representations may be promoted by Longyearbyen museum, in which it is explained that the reason for streets having numbers instead of names is that “grown men do not build houses in streets that are named Blueberry Road or Teddy Bear Yard”. Svalbard is thus seen — and performed — as a masculine and tough environment, fit for “grown men”. These pervasive representations are present in scientific literature as well; see for instance Schiermeier’s 2006 article in *Nature*, eloquently titled “The Iceman of Svalbard”, depicting a scientist on Svalbard as a ruthless heroes whose working conditions are compared to a Jack London novel [26].

Those elements are part of the “tourist gaze”. This concept has been developed by visual anthropologists and cultural geographers to enhance the fact that not only do different social groups have different understandings of the same objects, but those understandings might become part of the objects, of the wider collective knowledge and perception which shape what the object is². On Svalbard, the effectiveness of this gaze is seeable in the framing of certain places in order to comply with tourists’ expectation.

²See for instance Urry [24].



Figure 7: Bust of Lenin in Barentsburg with the 2011 “Our goal is communism” banner in the background.

A well-known example recalled by Stammler-Gossmann is that of Barentsburg Russian settlement, in which the old Lenin bust is among the most often photographed monuments on Svalbard. This statue is definitely part of the local *folklore*, that, is, the set of elements characterizing Barentsburg — and often Svalbard, and the set of popular myths about the archipelago, being rough and so remote geographically that it may be remote historically, a place frozen in Soviet time as it is

climatically frozen. What is interesting here is that far from trying to evacuate it as a negative cliché stigmatizing Barentsburg’s archaism, local authorities have decided to take on this striking image. In 2011, they changed a “Welcome to Barentsburg” banner behind the statue for a typical Soviet one, stating “Our goal is communism”, to the great pleasure of tourists.

Grydehøj [7] critically depicts a close pattern. *Kroa* restaurant in Longyearbyen, is designed upon the whole Svalbardian folklore: tables made out of driftwood, decorations of seemingly old barrels and ropes, busts of Soviet leaders. More generally, the author deplores that Longyearbyen has been turned into a “folklife museum”, and the Svalbardians turned into dummies playing old roles for the tourists; the former would despise the latter and their prejudices. It makes no doubt that tourist may arrive on Svalbard with entrenched clichés — was it only for this is precisely what tourist companies may promote — and that Svalbardians confronted with it may oppose this potentially degrading gaze. However, in the same article, Grydehøj adopts a more balanced point of view when he highlights the fact that residents on Svalbard embrace local heritage. *Kroa* restaurant, though owned by a tour operator, is “seen as belonging to the community and not to tourists”, especially since it permanently exposes authentic pictures of the Svalbardian image. Thus, even the most cliché elements of the past might be re-appropriated by local communities, using it as identifying tools and building a sense of community out of them, and not only distinguishing themselves from it through opposing a tourist “they” against the Svalbardian “us”.

3.3 A sense of place, a sense of community: belonging to the Svalbardians

Svalbardians’ social group thus built something “common” through the effective appropriation of the past. Grydehøj [7] explains that this constitution of heritage has helped build traditions — that is, recurring events associated with common references through which the community reassures its existence and stability, and from there, its cohesion:

“The Longyearbyen example, meanwhile, shows how, in the absence of claims of genetic inheritance, communities can sculpt exclusive tradition out of generally accessible heritage rather than out of the past itself”.

This is obvious in the recent organization by the local government of festivals celebrating the archipelago’s history. Stammer-Gossmann thus explains that “the history of the place is kept alive even though community is changing. Examples of this could be seen in the 107th Longyearbyen birthday activities (June 2013)”. This kind of events is well-known for being major landmarks in community-building. They consist in the celebration of a history which is presented as “common” to all current inhabitants, and the collective knowledge and identification to a common past is supposed to feed a feeling of community. Through the very fact of celebrating an event together and practicing collective joyful activities, a collectivity is created, bonds are tied between Svalbardians, thus effectively turning them into a community. This is what Durkheim called “collective effervescence” in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), a process leading to the effective tightening of social bonds.

An identity is composed among Svalbardians through mutual knowledge and understanding of common distinctive behaviors and representations. Stammer-Gossmann explains that an informal rite of passage, before residents on Svalbard may acknowledge one’s belonging to their community, is that she spends the four seasons on the archipelago. Thus the environment is once again determining here; reinforced by the images reflected in outsiders’ representations, the ability to confront Svalbard’s environmental peculiarity (namely, its harsh climate) is effectively recognized as one of the peculiar features for those who think themselves as belonging to the place. Kaltenborn [15] also characterized a Svalbardian distinctive “sense of place”, that is, an “emotional and symbolic identification with place” on the archipelago. He proves Svalbardians not only to be attached to their environment — and especially its distinctive natural features, that of large areas of untouched nature — but also to identify with it. They describe it as a part of their identity and may consider leaving the archipelago if this environment was spoiled.

This sense of place is shared by Svalbardians. It is not only *collective*, but *common*, in that it seems to serve as the basis for community identification — those of say and are believed to feel it are perceived as belonging to the community. There also is a proper “sense of community”, enhanced since the 1970’s. Evjen highlights the fact that even though living on Svalbard is transient, and may inhibit the building of a sustained community, this very impermanence — which has always been — precisely defines a Svalbardian identity:

“there exists a sense of local identity, with residents embracing a vision of Svalbard culture, even though this culture is characterized precisely by impermanence.” (quoted in [8]).

Maehlum, in a 1992 chapter [18] makes a related statement about language peculiarities on Svalbard. Studying the features of children spoken language, she notes that they often have no dialectal pattern, contrary to their parents who are dialectally marked depending on where in Norway they come from. But she states that “the fact that a person’s spoken language tends to become dialectally unmarked at the level of prosody is obviously a marked feature

in itself”, creating a linguistic peculiarity on Svalbard which may also serve as a shibboleth marking their belonging to Svalbard’s community.

Svalbardianers do consider themselves as belonging to a community. Even though the main answer when asked why they stay on Svalbard is that of low tax rates³, most recent articles display this sense of belonging to a community which is pervasive; especially in Longyearbyen. “We all are related to each other” as a taxi-driver answered Stammler-Gossmann. This community is peculiar, being a transient one, a “restless” one (*id.*). Paradoxically, it thus seems that the sustaining of the community may actually change its very nature. Was Svalbard to follow its current “normalization” path and its integration in global networks, it could be that it would become a place where a whole lifespan be possible, from being born to dying — actually, Stammler-Gossmann notices that already in 2008, there was an approval for spreading the ashes of the deceased on Svalbard. This would mean a deep change in what the community is, as it has been built upon a centurial history of transience.

Conclusion

Questioning to what extent it was possible to speak of Svalbardianers as forming a “community”, I began with an overview of the history of settlement on Svalbard. Until the 1970’s, the archipelago was mainly occupied on a national basis. Small groups of foreigners would come for short periods, in the utilitarian objective of exploiting Svalbard’s resources. If there was something like proper Svabardian features of such communities, those were temporary variations on national patterns. It was the case for the European whalers, the Pomor trappers, as well as the miners of the XXth century. What is more, they lived in groups highly controlled by companies and mainland countries, as well as highly constrained by the environment. Living on Svalbard was a parenthesis in people’s lives and did not allow for much community-building. Many things changed from 1975 on. Svalbard got increasingly internationalized, and its Governor gained so much autonomy as to make Longyearbyen a proper community, economically and socially diversified, even though it remains structured only on a relatively temporary basis — being born and dying there is not possible, thus preventing, to some extent, the sutainment of the community on a trans-generational basis. The establishment of a collective memory and a proper cultural landscape, especially through conservation policies, still allows for the building of a collective identity of “Svalbardianer”. Enhancing traditions and acknowledging the distinctive features of the community and its peculiar environment, Svalbardianers do build something like an integrated social group, especially while faced with the image the tourists reflect about the archipelago, and in constant interaction with the remarkable features of an exceptional environment.

³Cf. [28], tab.10. “Less taxes” is the first answer along with “unique environment”. However, I could find no documentation in English on how the question was asked and how open the answer could be. What is more, it may be that the a community spirit in Longyearbyen positively influences the “unique environment” answer, since this environment cannot be enjoyed out of social determinations.

To conclude, it seems only legitimate to use the word “Svalbardianer”, and not only to call that the people living there, but also to point out the fact that a strong identity is continuously built upon this particular place. This is seeable in the sense of place which characterizes the individuals settled on the island, and in the sense of community which seems to exist, and which in my opinion deserves to be further studied by anthropologists than it has been so far.

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Annexes

Cultural heritage in Svalbard, by type and function¹

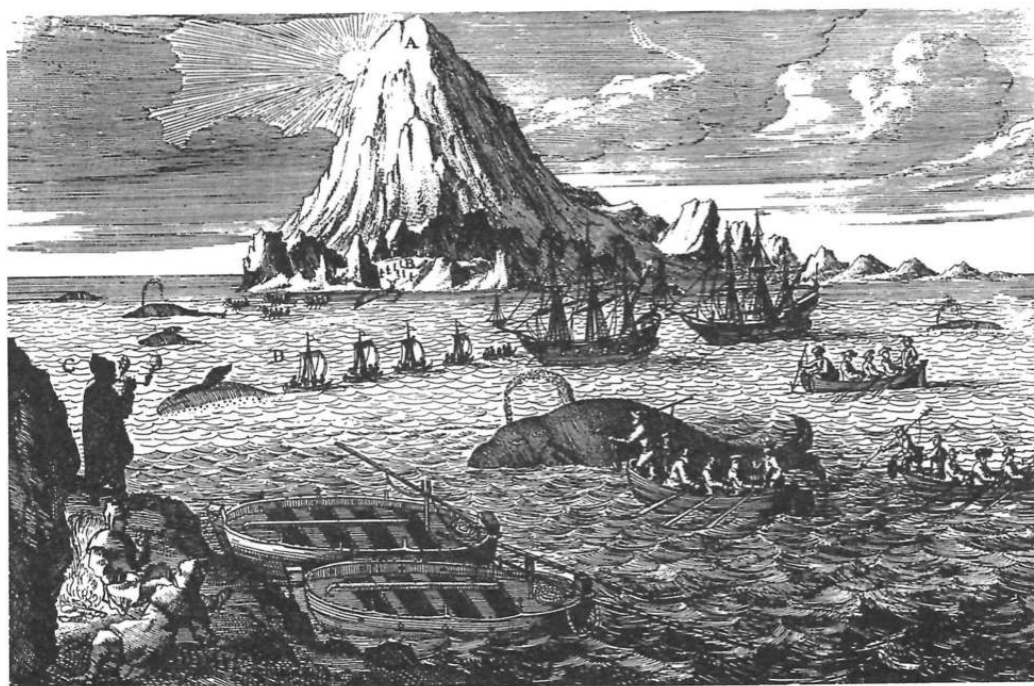
	Total	Building	Site	Train-oil boiler	Grave	Pomor cross	Boeatwreck	Other
Total	1 872	167	301	66	1 129	39	15	155
Western European whaling	1 125	..	82	66	972	..	..	5
Russian hunting	223	2	102	..	80	37	2	..
Norwegian hunting	174	91	40	..	27	..	5	11
Expedition remains	35	7	19	..	1	2	..	6
Industrial heritage	146	60	32	..	..	..	4	50
Public constructions	15	..	..	..	..	..	..	15
War remains	13	3	..	..	..	..	..	10
Site of walrus slaughter	2	..	..	..	..	..	..	2
Site of beluga slaughter	4	3	..	..	..	..	..	1
Settlement area	-	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Other	27	1	..	..	..	..	..	26
Unidentified heritage	108	..	26	..	49	..	4	29

¹The table is complete, and is based on manual count from 1994.

Source: Directorate for Cultural Heritage and Governor of Svalbard.

More information: <http://www.riksantikvaren.no/english/> and <http://www.syssemmannen.svalbard.no/english/>.

Figure 8: A list of 2005 cultural heritage items on Svalbard



The whale hunt in Spitsbergen in 1630. (Awnsham Churchill, *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* [London: Henry Lintot, 1744], Vol. 1, p. 442. Public Archives Canada, Picture Division, C-118314.)

Figure 9: A typical depiction of whaling in Svalbard in the XVIIth century. The number of boats as well as the buildings on the foreground island may show the consciousness the author had of the international level on which whaling activities occurred.