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JANINA PRIEBE

The Arctic Scramble Revisited
The Greenland Consortium and the Imagined Future of Fisheries in 1905

ABSTRACT Among the numerous phrases that depict imagined futures in the North, the belligerent rhetoric of an Arctic scramble stands out. The notion of seizing opportunities continues to surface in current debates on resource exploration in the Arctic. This article places the present scramble in Greenland in a longer historical context. It analyses the arguments of a stakeholder group that applied in 1905 to the Danish Home Office for private access to Greenland’s natural resources, and that hoped to introduce trade with the colony’s products on a for-profit basis. The arguments of this initiative offer an insight into how the urgency to act was constructed through the authority of science. This paper suggests that the scramble for the Arctic lent a common framework to otherwise inconsistent narratives. Although the consortium’s attempt to privatize Greenlandic fisheries and other resource industries was halted in 1906, their narratives highlighted perceived mismanagement by the colonial administration and anticipated and helped shape long-term changes in policy.

KEYWORDS Greenland, Arctic, narrative, natural resource management, fisheries
Introduction

In April 2013, Greenland’s then recently appointed Prime Minister, Aleqa Hammond, stated:

In the past we’ve relied mainly on fisheries which made the economy very fragile [...]. We need another way to stabilize the economy, and that will be mining. There’s really no alternative to that. (Levring 2013.)

Hammond’s comment feeds into a narrative of a scramble for the Arctic driven by a combination of resource prices and global warming. The scramble is an allusion to the phrase coined in late nineteenth-century Britain to depict the European powers’ annexation of the African continent in their rush for land, resources and prestige. Today, this phrase is frequently used to invoke a competitive atmosphere in debates on natural resource exploitation in the North.

For now, however, there is still a considerable gap between mere accessibility and economic exploitation rates of conventional reserves in the Arctic (Young 2011: 188). In March 2013, Greenland Minerals and Energy Ltd., a major stakeholder in mineral assets, painted a bright future for Greenland in a company presentation. The Kvanefjeld project near the island’s southern tip was placed on the top of the world’s largest rare earth element deposits—China was thoughtfully excluded from the diagram—and among the five largest uranium reserves (Greenland Minerals and Energy Ltd. 2013: 8).

These hopeful visions of non-existent projects have fueled a narrative of abundant but underdeveloped resource stocks characterized as leading inevitably to development through mining. This narrative gained strength...
when the Greenlandic parliament lifted its zero-tolerance policy towards uranium exploitation in a narrow vote half a year later (Nuttall 2013: 378).

In the early 1900s there was also extensive debate on the future of natural resource use in Greenland, at that time a colony under far stricter Danish rule, in which narratives of resource-based prosperity were similarly constructed to support the interests of particular commercial actors. At the start of the twentieth century Danish resource policy in Greenland was on the verge of a fundamental realignment (Hamilton & Lyster 2000: 198). Then, however, it was the prospect of a thriving fishing industry rather than mining that excited great interest in stakeholders. Commercialization and large-scale industrialization of fishing activities in Greenlandic waters had been a contentious issue for decades. The colonial administration’s trading policy promoted the ideal of the “great hunter” (Mattox 1973: 81) and sought to conserve the Greenlanders’ allegedly traditional lifestyle. Critical voices called for economic diversification since current colonial policy strongly favored successful seal hunters, who were able to profit from trading their products (Langgård 1999: 48). Advancing technology permitted increased fishing catches in much of the North Atlantic, while in Greenland equipment still mainly consisted of kayak and hand-lines (Andersen 1998: 147). Resource exploitation and development of Greenland’s society were intrinsically linked within discussions of the colony’s future. One narrative linked industrialization and free-market conditions to cultural and economic development in Greenland and thereby challenged the existence of the strict state monopoly, under Den Kongelige Grønlandske Handel, KGH [‘The Royal Greenland Trading Department’]. A group of individuals who described themselves as a consortium pushed that narrative by positioning themselves as stakeholders in a bright future driven by fisheries (Lidegaard 1990: 286). Their attempt to turn that vision into reality is the subject of this paper.

In his article on narrative in environmental history writing, “A Place for Stories,” William Cronon “urge[s] upon environmental historians the task of telling not just stories about nature, but stories about stories about nature” (Cronon 1992: 1375). These stories are, he continues, both motivation and explanation for actions. In this paper, the terms story and narrative are used interchangeably. The arguments presented in the Greenland consortium’s application adhere to a narrative structure. They become a story with a beginning, a climax and resolution or end (Roe 1989: 252). Besides being representations of power, stories are also a means to make sense of human relationships with the environment, incorporating epistemological assumptions that eventually define both questions and answers in a given realm (see also Bravo 2009: 260). What does Cronon’s assumption mean for stories of the future of natural resource use in the Arctic?
Narratives of imagined futures include epistemologies as well as expectations. By analyzing New North stories of the twentieth century from an environmental historian’s point of view, Andrew Stuhl has shown that “[s]ince the early 1900s, discourses and practices that appraised unfamiliar situations in the Arctic have accompanied attempts to cajole, conquer, civilize, consume, conserve, and capitalize upon the far north” (Stuhl 2013: 95). In these discourses, mastering natural resource use in the Arctic environment has been linked to claiming power to determine the future of territory, whether in the form of political or, as in the case of this paper, economic control. Moreover, Dag Avango et al. have shown that scientists took up a key role in articulating “a narrative that Sweden’s right to define the [Svalbard] archipelago’s future was linked to the fact that they had found coal on Spitsbergen” (Avango et al. 2013: 438). Narratives revolving around resource exploitation were central to claiming control over the future because they linked control over the environment to control of the physical space in political terms. While referring to Cronon’s perspective, Stuhl emphasizes that the variety of imagined—and promoted—futures played a crucial role in transforming the Arctic throughout the twentieth century. Discourses produced practices, for instance, as Stuhl describes, when it came to resource development schemes or defense structures (Stuhl 2013: 95).

The scramble for the Arctic is one of many discourses in the North. Yet they share a focal point of promising prosperity and mastering resource use in a challenging environment as proof of rightfully aspired political or economic sovereignty. Understanding the construction of such stories can reveal the diversity of the stakes in resource use covered by the theatrical rhetoric of the Arctic scramble. The study presented in this paper, of an attempt over a century ago to construct Greenland as a space where a particular form of natural resource management would lead to prosperity, reveals that narratives of prosperous Arctic futures are neither new nor inevitable.

The Greenland Consortium
In 1905, the Danish Home Office was approached by four groups of applicants who sought private access to Greenland’s resources (Sørensen 2007: 27). One of them consisted of a group of well-connected liberal and business-minded actors who joined forces to form a self-described “consortium,” the name I will henceforth use to refer to the group. The consortium’s application consisted of a number of documents that together flesh out a narrative about a coming scramble for natural resources, one that reflected the hopes and fears of a particular group of actors but which in some ways resonates into the present. Although this attempt to weaken the Danish state’s commercial monopoly in Greenland eventually failed, the consor-
tium’s main suggestions were implemented in state-led initiatives in the following years and taken up in colonial directives in the following decades (Jensen 1907: 79).

The consortium’s request was anything but modest. Its members applied for a private concession lasting 25 years for fishing and whaling within territorial waters along Greenland’s west coast in addition to proposing sheep and fox farming, reindeer herding, and down feather production. The diverse professional backgrounds of the consortium’s members reflected their plan to restructure the colony’s economy while inseparably linking modernization and privatization. Through personal engagement and investments, the Danish Farmers’ Bank (Den Danske Landmandsbank, Hypotek- og Vexelbank i Kjøbenhavn) and the East Asiatic Company (EAC, Østasiatiske Kompagni) were at the heart of a network that linked both industries and ambitions, closely interrelated by their worldwide ventures in shipping and extractive industries. The ten consortium members were backed by a range of leading figures in industry, finance and Copenhagen’s cultural life in an additional document that confirmed their financial support. Moreover, this document contained a scientific assessment of the promising conditions for establishing industrialized fisheries in Greenland, signed on behalf of the government’s consultant for fisheries.

Internal communication of the consortium’s members with the director’s office of the Danish Farmers’ Bank suggests that Emil Raffael Glückstadt (1875–1923), a substantial player in the bank’s management at that time, was the major initiator (Bro 1991: 238). His father (and managing director of the Farmers’ Bank), Isak Glückstadt (1839–1910), was among the prominent supporters of the consortium. At the time of the consortium’s application in 1905, the Farmers’ Bank was the most important financier of private companies in Denmark’s natural resource industries and one of the largest financial institutions in northern Europe (Nielsen 1983: 108). Another prominent consortium member was Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen (1872–1907), a renowned author and journalist for Politiken, a Copenhagen newspaper. As a central figure of the capital’s cultural life he committed himself to the Greenlanders’ political self-determination, bringing what he saw as the colonial system’s weaknesses to the attention of a broader public (Thorleifsen 1999: 64). In 1906 he led an expedition to North-East Greenland that never returned. Among his scientific advisors in the planning phase were the geologist and botanical specialist Nikolaj E.K. Hartz (1867–1937) and the army captain Daniel Bruun (1856–1931) (Amdrup 1913: 38). In 1904, the latter had served as war correspondent in Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese War for Berlingske Tidene, another Copenhagen newspaper (Cedergreen Bech (ed.) 1979–1984). Hartz and Bruun were both members of the consortium in
1905. Other consortium members included Kristian Mikkelsen Vendsyssel, the founder of Vendsyssel Packing Co., a company that sold frozen fish from the United States to commercial smokehouses in Europe (Rosenkamp (ed.) 2008).

Rationality and Private Management

In the main application document, dated 9 October, 1905, the Greenland Consortium proposed to manage the whole process of producing and trading animal resources, and to administer the social insurance of the local work force on a private basis (A1 1905: 2). The applicants offered a comprehensive solution to a situation that was constructed as unsatisfactory and even carelessly neglected. The applicants claimed that they would improve economic conditions for the indigenous society and thereby facilitate cultural development. Their plan was a clear critique of the KGH, which had held a monopoly over natural resource exploitation and trade in Greenland for over a century and now presided over a territory marked by “economic depression and social and spiritual stagnation” (Mattox 1973: 48). The KGH’s protectionist policy in the colony embodied a paternalistic and conservative approach that was increasingly questioned since liberal forces had gained political influence in Denmark’s parliamentary system change of 1901 (Oldendow 1936: 76). The consortium framed its ultimate purpose as the more effective administration and exploitation of Greenland’s natural resources. This argument linked the Greenlandic population’s social welfare directly to its economic success:

As argument for granting the concession we would like to state that our primary objective is twofold: partly, it is to develop such sources of relief that have not or only to a limited extent been put to use; and partly, to develop the native population’s economic situation and, through that, [...] improve conditions for a cultural upswing. (A1 1905: 2.)

The premise for the argumentation was that denying economic productivity meant disregarding social well-being. Thereby, the consortium refuted the KGH’s argument that isolating the colony from economic development was actually beneficial to the indigenous population (Bro 1991: 246).

Developing fisheries of various species was presented as being of primary importance in the consortium’s application. Practical details concerning implementation followed: the consortium pointed out that it had access to vessels equipped with on-board deep-freeze facilities that would ensure that the fish was brought fresh to the market in its best condition. While a draft of the application mentions merely cooling facilities, the final version
explicitly refers to deep-freezing. The latter also lacks the draft’s straightforward critique. The KGH was openly accused of mismanagement in the draft: “All the fish is salted down on the spot so that in Denmark, after bleeding decreased its quality, it is sold for smoking” (A1.B: 2). This sentence does not appear in the final version, which instead elaborated on how the consortium would be able to maintain the quality of the fish during transport:

[W]e, the undersigned concession applicants, will see to the greatest extent possible that the fish is brought fresh in frozen condition to market [by transporting it] in ice [...] and to bring the products to the Danish and foreign Market. (A1 1905: 1.)

The final application underlined the consortium’s plan to improve coastal infrastructure by means of establishing modern facilities, such as deep-freeze warehouses, at all major fishing stations along the western coast. Yet another sentence only appears in the draft and suggests that criticism was held back carefully in the final version:

[T]he trade in fish, as it had been carried out until a couple of years ago by Danish officials in Greenland and, thereafter, by the Royal Trade Department, is both inefficient and of little value for the Greenlanders. (A1.B: 1.)

In the above-cited quotation from the draft, the Danish adjective used is urationel, which implies the notion of something being both impractical and incomprehensible by means of reason. It also relates to waste and thereby exceeds the meaning of the obvious literal translation ‘irrational’ (ODS). The term illustrates how the consortium’s plans responded to the deeply rooted assumption that the KGH’s policy led not only to inefficient resource use but also, in fact, the waste of resources. During the nineteenth century, it was common practice among Danish civil servants to trade fish privately for their own profit. Only in 1903 were Arctic char (called laks or lax in the consortium’s application) and Greenland halibut added to the list of export products under monopoly restriction. Cod, which would become an icon of thriving fishing industries in the North Atlantic, and eventually of their dramatic collapse in the 1960s, was added in 1910 (Strøm Tejsen 1977: 462). Before that, only the cod’s liver had been an official export item (Mattox 1973: 82). Like exported seal blubber, liver was processed for train oil. It was used, amongst other purposes, for heating and as ingredient for industrial applications such as lacquer. The growing use of synthetic substances and palm oil, however, had already affected market prices for
animal train oil and was a major cause of deficit for the KGH’s accounts at the turn of the century (Strøm Tøjsen 1977: 464).

Shortcomings in Denmark’s colonial trading policy had provoked critique throughout the late nineteenth century. The wife of a Danish civil servant stationed in Greenland complained in a letter to her mother about a strange, wasteful habit: Greenlanders extracted the cod’s liver and sold it to the trading stations while the high-quality fish itself was not used. Around the same time, a missionary observed this practice and stated that it “caused a great part of it [the catch] to be left to rot” (Marquardt 1999: 29). Critique spread further when cases of fraud and misappropriation of Greenlandic products by KGH staff were revealed in 1902. Journalists involved in this disclosure would shortly after become important members of the consortium (Bro 1991: 230). In its application, the consortium connected efficient resource use to rationality and sound decision-making. This narrative presented colonial trade and exploitation policy as wasteful, that is, inefficient, and thus inherently irrational: “The consortium established by the applicants [...] could much better than a monopolized state business [...] provide beneficial marketing for the fish” (A1 1905: 2). Knowledge of how to place products in profitable markets was, in the consortium’s argumentation, the expertise of a private initiative, not the state. It was a clear sign that the stagnation associated with the KGH’s administration could be transformed into a boom if only power were handed to the consortium.

Parallels with Mining
In the application’s concluding appeal the consortium emphasized the state’s positive experience with privatizing branches of resource use in the past, particularly mining. Some of those initiatives were now filling the government’s coffers with new sources of income:

In view of the fact that the government and the parliament have already granted the Cryolite Mining and Trading Company a concession for operating the cryolite mine at Ivigtut [today known as Ivvittuut], and now, in 1903, have granted the merchant J. Bernburg a twenty-year concession for mining activities in Greenland under government supervision including a share of the net earnings for the state’s treasury, we, the applicants, cherish the hope that a concession may be granted under similar conditions. (A1 1905: 3.)

Julius Bernburg (1840–1911) was a major figure in exports and specialized in agricultural products. As of 1 January, 1904, the Home Office granted Bernburg a concession for extraction of copper, lead, graphite, asbestos and mica in all of western Greenland (with the exception of the area surrounding
Ivigtut. An expedition to assess the potential for mining there, financed by the Danish Farmers’ Bank, had been carried out in the fall of 1903 (A6 1904). Moreover, Bernburg and Isak Glückstadt had had another common goal since the 1880s: building up the Copenhagen Free Port, a harbor transfer site with special customs regulations that was supposed to boost Copenhagen’s position as a hub for international trade. The Free Port opened in 1894 and Bernburg served on the Free Port Corporation’s first steering board until 1911. In 1891, the corporation had been transformed to a joint stock corporation under the leadership of the Danish Farmers’ Bank, which held the majority of shares (Schovelin 1921: 365–366). Hans Niels Andersen, another prominent patron of the consortium, was also a committed supporter of the Free Port. He helped draw up a strategy for using the port to secure Denmark’s future position in an accelerating and globally connected economy (A4 1902).

Bernburg’s concession excluded the area around Ivigtut that was already
occupied by the Cryolite Mining and Trading Company (*Kryolith Mine- og Handelselskabet*), mentioned as a positive example of privatizing resource exploitation in the consortium’s application. The company held a license to extract cryolite in Ivigtut as a private venture—the only one in Greenland before Bernburg’s concession was granted. Cryolite, a rare mineral, was used in aluminum production but it still occupied a rather marginal position in metal industries. The Cryolite Mining and Trading Company’s major financier was Carl Frederik Tietgen (1829–1901), director of Privatbanken, Denmark’s major financial institute besides the Danish Farmers’ Bank and Handelsbanken. When Tietgen co-founded the mining company in 1866 he was confident that cryolite would be essential to future industries. The mineral was used in both of the only two known production processes for aluminum at the time. Tietgen assumed that cryolite trade was “on the verge of a boom” (Kragh 1995: 294) in the near future.

Generally, however, Tietgen’s bank policy had not followed the late nineteenth-century trend of extensive investments in natural resource industries and industrial stock market companies (Nielsen 1983: 106). This was in contrast to the Farmers’ Bank, led by Glückstadt, who was ten years younger than Tietgen. Several years earlier, the two men’s paths had crossed at an occasion that was emblematic of their different positions. In 1892, H.N. Andersen approached the two bank directors in search of financial support for his vision of a shipping company that would connect South East Asia to Europe. Tietgen did not see the potential of Andersen’s idea and refused to invest in his risky venture. Instead, it was Isak Glückstadt who became major financier, creative mind and co-founder of the EAC in 1897 (Ellemose 2007: 39). Andersen, however, would be remembered as the company’s charismatic founder (Eggers-Lura 1993: 185). Only a few years later, both would seek to channel the synergy of their ventures in the consortium, taking the same narrative of a prosperous future driven by private economic initiative to a hitherto closed colony.

**Scientific Recommendations**

Then as now, narratives concerning the governance of natural resources in Greenland drew upon the authority of science. The consortium repeatedly emphasized that their concern was a matter of great urgency by referring to the decline of sea mammals in the coastal region as the greatest danger to the colony’s economy. This assertion was by no means undisputed (Bendixen 1922: 20), but it was still presented as common knowledge:

> It is a matter of fact that the marine animals partly are in decline along
the Greenland coast, and partly are taking themselves further and further away from the inhabited areas. It is acknowledged also by all Greenland experts that the wealth of the Greenlanders is through no fault of their own constantly decreasing. (A1 1905: 1–2.)

The consortium asserted that the Greenlanders’ wealth was decreasing because marine animals were fewer in numbers and harder to find near settlements. Again, the draft contained a slightly sharper way of bringing the case forward. Instead of Greenland experts (Grønlandskyndige), the draft stated that even the Trading Department’s directorate (Handelsdirektoratet) had acknowledged changes in marine animal populations.

In contrast to the consortium’s claim, however, the decline of those animals (particularly seals, in this context) was not accepted common knowledge. Even two decades later, a professor of zoology at Copenhagen University and a former governor of South Greenland would engage in an open dispute over whether seal populations had been overexploited at the turn of the twentieth century (Bendixen 1927: 76). In the 1980s, the same question arose once more just when Greenland’s economy was turning to shrimp fisheries as a result of depleted fish stocks (Hamilton et al. 2003: 274). Again, it was debated whether Greenland’s economic transition in the early twentieth century was caused by environmental necessities, that is, by declining numbers of seals due to a warming climate (Boisen & Nielsen 1982: 126). Eventually, strict climatic determinism was refuted conclusively in the course of this debate’s revival (Sørensen 1982; Smidt 1983). In 1905, the consortium phrased declining numbers of seals and abundant fish stocks in their argumentation as common knowledge that was, moreover, acknowledged by “Greenland experts.” The label of accepted common knowledge implied that opposing views appeared irrational. Again, this argument emphasized the consortium’s critique of the current colonial policy that was allegedly not based on rational decisions.

Shortly after the consortium’s main application of October 1905, a letter of support, including a scientific assessment, was submitted to the Home Office. Although not formally part of the consortium, those who signed the testimonial demonstrated the high-level support it enjoyed from scientific as well as business figures. Notably, the letter of support was signed by Christian Frederik Drechsel (1854–1927) in his capacity as the government’s consultant on fisheries. Even if the decline in marine resources could be taken as a safely established fact, Drechsel pointed to the continued importance of advancing knowledge regarding the abundance of fish stocks in Greenlandic waters since only this would allow for a successful fishing industry in the future. Lack of scientific knowledge of the environ-
ment had, in the supporters’ opinion, prevented further development to date. Drechsel pointed to the thriving Arctic char fisheries in American waters to illustrate the absurd situation that resulted from this shortcoming: “[N]owadays Arctic char is transported from the western parts of America to Europe, including to Denmark, to be smoked and processed” (A3 1905: 1–2).

Drechsel’s statement depicted fisheries as a sector where national economies were competing, yet at the same time becoming tied together. Drechsel had also been recently appointed the Danish representative to the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), an international marine science organization founded in 1902. From the beginnings ICES had a “dual identity” (Rozwadowski 2004: 46). On the one hand, the council was devoted to advancing hydrographic and biological research related to fisheries and to understanding the rising problem of overfishing. On the other hand, it acted as a consultant to governments regarding “how to best manage fisheries […] and how to best promote new fisheries in underutilized areas” (Rozwadowski 2004: 46). The link between knowledge and rational management could hardly have been clearer.

Drechsel’s colleagues in Denmark included the marine zoologist C.G. Johannes Petersen (1860–1928) whose work regarding plaice tagging experiment would soon become well respected. On Drechsel’s initiative, Petersen became director of the Biological Station (Dansk Biologisk Station), Denmark’s national institute for marine research, in 1889 (Rozwadowski 2002: 51). Petersen too was involved with ICES as a member of the organization’s special working group on overfishing. He cautioned against the consequences of extensive trawl fisheries (see Petersen 1903), and, in November 1905, submitted a one-page scientific assessment as a supplement to the consortium’s application. Despite his caution elsewhere, he urged extending fishing activities in Greenland, where he saw ample opportunity given the right approach: “Every effort to exploit these fisheries has my greatest sympathy” (A2 1905). Petersen assumed that an Arctic char fishery would be especially promising since it was inexpensive to establish, but the catch would still fetch high market prices. This recommendation was clearly based on economic considerations. Accordingly, Petersen left the final question of the venture’s profitability to experienced traders: “[W]hether this pays for the high transport costs and other expenses can be justified and a big enough market found, I leave to the fish traders to decide” (A2 1905).

Petersen concluded that in order to benefit from these opportunities private actors had to be put in charge of extending Greenland’s fishing industry. He predicted bright prospects from a scientific point of view, provided that the industrialization of fisheries was a private instead of a state-led project. Petersen’s reputation as director of the Biological Station added
to the credibility of an assessment that, nevertheless, clearly derived from economics as much as biology. His status as a scientist lent authority to the consortium’s narrative. The connotation of the efficient, objective rationality of science provided moral superiority in view of the fraud committed by the colonial administration’s staff and the waste of resources as a consequence of mismanagement and misguided policy (Bro 1991: 230).

On the one hand, the consortium constructed efficiency as a means to develop the Greenlanders’ culture under the paradigm of productivity (A1 1905: 2). But on the other hand, the description of future competition for fish stocks in Greenland’s coastal waters suggested that wasting or not exploiting these assets at all left them vulnerable to foreign powers. In the consortium’s narrative, the KGH’s civil servants, who were accused of misappropriating Greenlandic products, thus failed either to promote the development of Greenland for the sake of its inhabitants or to secure Denmark’s sovereignty over resources on Greenland’s territory. Drechsel and Petersen did not only add to the credibility of the consortium’s narrative. Their assessment as well as their reputation as scientists was crucial to constructing the consortium’s vision of economic prosperity as being based on rational principles of efficiency.

Rivalry and Rejection
The consortium’s business plan, titled “Planer for fiskeriet m.m i Grønland” ['Plans for fisheries etcetera in Greenland'], delineates how the group planned to implement extensive exploitation of Greenland’s living resources, primarily fisheries. It opens with a dramatic portrayal of the near future if no immediate action was taken to secure the colony’s own resource stocks:

> It will hardly be long before American fishermen will, again, initiate an attack on the Greenlandic fishing grounds; as is known, trawling has only been started on the American East Coast last year; as soon as fisheries there are ruined in a few years’ time, there is redoubled risk that they will turn to the Greenlandic fishing grounds—especially if vessels under Danish flag have not occupied these territories. (A4 1905: 1.)

In view of the recently spreading use of trawlers along the American coasts, the consortium was careful to remind Danish public authorities of potent competitors in Greenlandic waters, in the context of Petersen’s valuation of the fisheries. Just as Drechsel had done in the consortium’s letter of support, Petersen called attention to the thriving Arctic char fisheries in the US. His reference to exports to Europe included criticism of the colonial administration for failing to exploit either the fish stocks or the markets for them. The consortium would, by contrast, promote trade with frozen
fish to Russia, which was seen as a strategically important market. As H.N. Andersen had outlined in an internal strategy paper of September 1902 for the Copenhagen Free Port Corporation, advancement of communication and transport technologies affected the world’s present economic order (A5 1902: 4). In this paper, Andersen warned that Denmark’s strength in the agricultural sector would soon be diminished. Improved communication within the vast Russian Empire, as he assumed, would soon boost its competitiveness on the market for agricultural products. Thus, Andersen saw Denmark’s future in trade. The Greenland Consortium and its supporters were closely tied to the private Free Port Corporation, as steering board members or in managing positions. Drechsel, who had signed his scientific assessment on behalf of the consortium’s supporters, was the Corporation’s current director. In view of Andersen’s strategy paper, the application of 1905 can be read as a narrative evoking an atmosphere of competition for resources while also responding to fear of a growing rivalry for market shares. Considering the consortium members’ personal and economic ties, competition for resources could plausibly also be read as a proxy for competition for market shares in international commodity trade.

On behalf of the Greenland Consortium, Mylius-Erichsen had met the Minister of the Interior, Sigurd Berg, on 2 November, 1905 to elaborate on the application. As Mylius-Erichsen reported, Berg clearly signaled his personal approval. Berg had already turned down three other initiatives in favor of the consortium (A7 1905: 2). The historian Daniel Thorleifsen confirms that the government was indeed open to allowing capitalist interests access to Greenland’s natural resources at that point (Thorleifsen 1999: 66). However, the Greenland Administration and KGH held a gatekeeper position. The application of the Greenland Consortium was eventually rejected. As Henning Bro describes in his article on private capital in Greenland, the Danish authorities feared that a too powerful private consortium could develop into a “state within a state” (Bro 1991: 242). Thorleifsen states that “the protectionist principle and the Danish state’s paternalistic colonial policy in Greenland which was permeated with social conservatism throughout the nineteenth century” (Thorleifsen 1999: 66) eventually prevented privatization and liberalization in the colony’s resource industries at that time.

Based on the promising future outlined by the consortium, the professor of zoology Adolf Severin Jensen (1866–1953), who would later engage in a reviving debate about depleting seal populations in the 1920s, was ordered to conduct fishing trials on the government’s behalf, supported by the KGH. Jensen’s task was to assess prospects for a large-scale fishing industry (Jensen 1907: 79). In the following years, reforms changed resource use in the colony fundamentally and eventually shifted towards the extensive
commercialization of fishing, but under the state’s control (Sørensen 1983: 34–38).

Conclusion

The application of the Greenland Consortium articulated major arguments in a discourse that criticized Danish colonial policy in the early twentieth century. It constructed a powerful narrative that drew on different sources of expertise. Knowledge of the current, allegedly unsatisfying situation in Greenland was referred to as common understanding, leaving aside opposing views. The scientific assessment of the fisheries’ future potential was a pillar of the consortium’s application, interwoven throughout with economic policy recommendations. Drechsel presented his assessment in the same document that confirmed the consortium’s financial backing by key figures of Denmark’s business and finance sector.

The construction of this narrative reveals the diversity of the set of tools that the consortium used to appeal to the authorities. Its argument for a rapid industrialization of fisheries on a private basis consisted of two key elements. Firstly, there was the pervading emphasis on rational and efficient methods: existing policies were presented as unsustainable and inefficient, with an implicit critique of colonial protectionism as incapable of ever surmounting these problems. Secondly, lack of scientific knowledge was interpreted as scientific uncertainty that demanded taking sides rather than more data. The consortium’s claim that its interpretation was “common knowledge” became a powerful argument in favor of its plan. The scramble rhetoric of international rivalry and unique opportunities both obscured inconsistencies and lent a common dynamic to the group’s arguments. It also created a pressing urgency to act. As Cronon points out, an ambiguous narrative can incorporate responses to diffuse, yet common fears and promises of a bright future, while still conveying unambiguous meaning: the “[n]arrative succeeds to the extent that it hides the discontinuities, ellipses, and contradictory experiences that would undermine the intended meaning of its story” (Cronon 1992: 1349–1350).

Today, the belligerent rhetoric of the Arctic scramble may have lost its persuasiveness for scholars, yet it remains a pervading theme in public discourse. The vision of the Greenland Consortium of 1905 shows that the scenario of a scramble for Arctic resources was, even over a hundred years ago, seen as a powerful argument by a commercial and cultural elite. Key stakeholders in the consortium, like H.N. Andersen, were committed to developing Copenhagen’s Free Port into a hub of international trade. Their claim that Greenland could (again) be turned into a profitable space was based on the argument that they had the access and technological means to
place Greenlandic products on profitable markets (Al 1905: 2). The consortium’s vision for Greenland also located Copenhagen at the center of the stakeholders’ world-spanning ventures in natural resource industries, thus changing the geography of economic linkages fundamentally.

Researchers dealing with the geopolitical importance of Arctic resources today suggest that “[c]loser empirical scrutiny indicates that neorealist expectations of a geopolitical rush for Arctic resources are unrealistic” (Keil 2013: 19). Still, the scramble succeeds as a narrative of seizing opportunities. In the current debate on the future of uranium and rare earth exploitation, the government’s narrative places Greenland, once again, on the verge of a new era of resource use. The past reliance on fisheries is directly linked to future prospects of mining. This narrative is fueled by imagined futures in the shape of promises and expectations that eventually transformed into a (possibly) momentous parliamentary decision, creating a new reality. For now, this reality is merely the end of a zero-tolerance policy towards uranium exploitation and the hope of exploring one of the earth’s largest mineral reserves. This transformation of a narrative centered on imagined futures illustrates the continuing importance of stories told under the rubric of an Arctic scramble. They create a straight line between past, present and future.

As the policy analyst Emery Roe suggests, cogent future scenarios are shaped in a narrative structure, starting with a suggested present cause resulting in future developments (Roe 1989: 252). The consortium’s narrative of 1905 did not only identify present problems by relating them to past developments. It was also a claim of expertise to control the future. In the article “Reconfiguring environmental expertise” of 2013, Sverker Sörlin describes how the environmental, that is, an “integrated and future-oriented perspective […] with human agency at the core” (Sörlin 2013: 19), emerged in the 1920s and became central to various fields of expertise. From that perspective, the Greenland Consortium illustrates the broad variety of actors that began claiming knowledge of the future environment in the early twentieth century. Scientists as well as business and financial experts claimed to be able to predict and control environmental factors in the future of the colony’s natural resource industries.

The background theme of an Arctic scramble made the consortium’s claims appear even more urgent while also accommodating a broad range of narratives. As today’s uranium debate in Greenland suggests, this theme continues to lend coherence to an inconsistent conglomerate of imaginations of an Arctic future, despite a century of fundamental changes in all aspects of society and environment. Rather than being a consistent future scenario itself the Arctic scramble had and still has the “promethean power of producing futures” (Adam & Groves 2007: 78).
NOTES

1 All sources referred to in this paper are copies of the application documents belonging to the Danish Farmers' Bank located in the Danish National Business Archives, Aarhus. All quotations from these sources in this article are translated by me from Danish.

2 Among others, William G. Mattox has pointed out that the term laks or lax in Danish sources of the early twentieth century refers to Arctic char and not, as the literal translation might suggest, to salmon (see Mattox 1973: 38).

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AUTHOR

Janina Priebe is a PhD candidate in History of Science and Ideas at Umeå University, Sweden. Her dissertation project revolves around different perspectives on natural resource use in Greenland in the early twentieth century. She is affiliated with the Arctic Research Center at Umeå University (ARCUM).

janina.priebe@umu.se