

SEES.NL/2015: the largest Dutch Polar Expedition ever undertaken

Modern climate change is having a dramatic effect on the environments, wildlife and cultural heritage of the Arctic. For several decades, the Arctic Centre has been investigating these transformations from an inter-disciplinary perspective, and communicating the results to scientists, policy-makers and the general public. Such is the speed and impact of current change that the Arctic Centre decided to mount a major expedition to Edgeøya in 2015. The expedition had three primary goals:

1. To undertake intensive fieldwork in and around the uninhabited island of Edgeøya to record the contemporary situation, and to compare it with data gathered in 1968, 1977 and 1986 during earlier Dutch expeditions. This would give an indication of the pace and severity of climate change impacts on this fragile ecosystem.
2. Public engagement: literally, the idea was that the expedition would become a flagship undertaking that would inform the wider public about the impacts of climate change on the Arctic.
3. To bring together all the Polar science talent in the Netherlands and get it to focus on common issues and research questions, that could be developed later via publications and funding applications.



Climate change impact

By conducting new fieldwork in areas already surveyed by the earlier Dutch expeditions, Edgeøya has one of the longest time series of ecological data in the entire Arctic. This would not only be a valuable scientific undertaking, but also a good opportunity to inform a wider public about how serious the current situation in the Arctic actually is. From idea to realization eventually took six years. The award of major financial support from the Netherlands Research Council (NWO) added major momentum, and



commitments from a tourist organization that has long-term links with many Arctic Centre staff (Oceanwide Expeditions) provided an important logistical platform as well as experienced guides to support fieldwork. The Arctic centre gathered a strong multidisciplinary team of experts, who formed the scientific driving force of the expedition. Important experiences

during the Arctic Centre's 2014 expedition to Jan Mayen Island, which was run in

collaboration with the Netherlands Navy and Marine Corps, and with the support of Norway, had demonstrated the need to have an effective media outreach strategy. Therefore journalists were embedded within the SEES team.

In the end, the SEES.NL expedition (Scientific Expedition Edgeøya Svalbard) became the largest Dutch polar expedition ever undertaken. On board were a total of 55 Dutch scientists, from a wide variety of disciplines, ranging from archaeology and ecology to social geographers and cultural anthropologists. The Dutch national broadcasting organisation (NOS) participated with a reporter, camera team, an presenter of the daily weather forecast. In total 12 reports were produced for the main national television news together with radio reports.. In addition, other newspaper journalists and a science writer reported on the expedition progress and dynamics. After 9 days of intensive fieldwork the ship returned to Longyearbyen, where Dutch Foreign Minister, Bert Koenders, together with his Norwegian colleague Børge Brende, were waiting to meet the participants. The expedition ended with a symposium in Longyearbyen where we celebrated the Norwegian-Dutch collaboration, with presentations from Kim Holmèn, Geir Gabrielsen and Thor Larsen, expedition reports from participants and with people from Longyearbyen in the public.



The expedition had a major impact on Dutch public awareness of Arctic issues. In total, the SEES.NL expedition resulted in over 300 articles appearing in newspapers, magazines, on websites and on television. Media interest has not declined in the following months, and expedition scientists still regularly appear in the media and a delegation was invited in the Dutch parliament. All these articles are available at <http://www.sees.nl/sees2015>.

The remote fieldwork and complex logistics, which included numerous encounters with polar bears, were far from easy, but the expedition did overcome these challenges and was an enormous success.

