

LANDSCAPES OF NORTHERN EXTRACTION

Mia Bennett

University of Vienna and University of California, Los Angeles

Floating icebergs and melting glaciers are iconic symbols of the Arctic, but the region's built environment is equally impressive. During my travels in Norway and Russia from 2013 to 2016, I photographed some of the buildings, roads, bridges, ports, pipelines, and other structures that punctuate these northern countries' vast and frigid landscapes. Much of this infrastructure is designed to make the Arctic more livable for its four million inhabitants. Increasingly, governments of Arctic nations are also building long-distance infrastructure networks to facilitate the export of natural resources extracted from the North for consumption in the world's metropolises lying to the south. Thus, global demand for resources as well as a changing climate are reshaping the Arctic region. To that end, this photo essay counters notions of the Arctic as pristine and unaltered by illustrating the hard edges of modernity at the top of the world – a place that, though geographically remote, is indelibly connected to the rest of the planet.



Mirny City, Sakha Republic, Russia: the world's largest open-pit diamond mine appears ready to swallow the buildings teetering on its edge. The Soviet Union opened the mine in 1955. As workers gradually took up residence on the mine's outskirts, an impromptu city sprung up on the edge of the precipitous hole. While open pit operations ceased in 2001, underground mining operations at the same site commenced in 2009. Other open pit mines



perforate the landscape of the Sakha Republic. Diamond mining enriched federal and regional treasuries during the Soviet era and continues to do so into the present day, yet it has decimated the environment used by indigenous peoples like the Even and Evenki for reindeer herding.



Survey roads for oil and gas exploration cut a grid into the landscape of the Russian taiga in the Sakha Republic, located in northeastern Siberia. While the republic has historically produced over a quarter of the world's diamonds from mines such that in Mirny City, it is slowly shifting into oil and gas production for energy markets in East Asia. As long-distance pipelines are constructed to connect the Sakha Republic's oil and gas fields to China, the



republic's capital, Yakutsk, remains isolated. The city of 300,000 people is underserved by the Russian highway and railroad system due to the lack of a bridge across the Lena River. In the Arctic, it appears that infrastructure is often built with extraction, rather than people, in mind.



Cod (*lutefisk*) are hung and dried on wooden pyramidal structures in the town of Svolvær in Norway's Lofoten Islands. This method of processing cod has remained relatively unchanged over the past several centuries while the global commodity chains shipping and trading these fish products have become more complex. Migrant workers from Baltic states are often the ones working in the cod industry, replacing Norwegians seeking higher paying



jobs far to the south of the Lofoten Islands in cities like Oslo and Stavanger. The pieces of cod hanging on these wooden racks are actually cod heads, a remnant that Norwegians consider undesirable. Once dry, the fish heads are ground up and turned into protein powder for export to Nigeria.



Whereas cod hang on wooden structures in Norway, at a local market in Yakutsk, one of the world's coldest cities, fish are sold standing up. Seafood is one of the Arctic's largest and oldest export commodities. The Arctic's oil and gas resources remain relatively unexploited, but entire animal species have been wiped out over the past several centuries. Beginning in the 1600s, foreigners from places including the Netherlands, Spain, and England



penetrated the world's northern seas in search of lucrative resources for export, like whales for their oil and blubber. Similarly on land, centuries of rapacious hunting and trapping of fur-bearing animals for export rather than use by indigenous peoples have decimated populations of creatures like minks and sables. Still, despite drastic changes to fish and marine mammal populations, many groups in the Arctic continue to rely on its seas and rivers for sustenance.