

*“What future for the Arctic?”
Talk at the Explorers Club, New York,
25 September 2013*

Mr President of the Explorer club,
Mr Honorary President
of the explorer Club,

Mr President of student
on ice Foundation,

Dear Geoff Green,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

It is both an honour and a pleasure for me to speak today in this historic place, on a subject dear to my heart, a century after the visit my great-grandfather Albert I made to the United States, between August and October 1913.

Of course, having a distinguished audience in front of one does not make things easier. But, like any adventure, the one I am taking in talking to you about the Arctic has its share of risk... although a very minor one, since the only hostile-looking creatures I've met so far here have been stuffed animals!

So, I am delighted to have this opportunity to talk about a subject that connects us, that needs people of goodwill to rally to the cause.

The Arctic, Ladies and Gentlemen, is a region that condenses the bulk of the challenges our planet faces. Challenges both local and global, ecological and human, economic and political. In the Arctic more than anywhere else, multiple hazards coexist, feeding each other; the solutions are complex and the temporalities contradictory... These factors make the future of the Arctic a major challenge of this century.

That is why I have made the preservation of this region a major commitment, both in my work as the Monegasque head of state and in my personal initiatives.

It is this commitment that led me in 2005 to undertake a first expedition to Spitsbergen. It was a family tradition, in that I was following in the footsteps of my great-great-grandfather, Prince Albert I, who had made expeditions to this archipelago a century earlier, of course in much more difficult conditions.

Then, in 2006, I went to the North Pole. And I must say that this trip was one of the things that led me, that same year, to set up a foundation dedicated to the environment, which includes the Arctic as an important area of action.

Since 2006, we have put a lot of energy into a variety of causes in the region, from protecting polar bears to mapping biodiversity hotspots in northern Quebec to supporting numerous political and scientific initiatives.

In the light of these experiences, therefore, I can start with the facts... facts that we now have very precise knowledge of.

The Arctic region, as you know, is one of the main victims of global warming, which we have been observing for a few decades now. Although some – increasingly few fortunately – continue to question that human activity is causing global warming, it is now a proven reality. We are seeing major changes in the global climate, the consequences of which are very real.

In the Arctic, in particular, the extent of sea-ice melting is more alarming each year. After the previous record low in 2007, the figures for 2012 show that the summer sea ice had shrunk by half. And scientists still agree in forecasting the total disappearance of the summer sea ice in the next few decades, if not the next few years...and this even if, as you may know, the volume of the sea pad at the end of this summer is well above the one of last year of about 1400 cubic kilometres.

Beyond the local impact on precious and vulnerable ecosystems, Arctic warming has serious consequences for us all.

The Arctic ice indeed reflects much of the solar energy it receives, thereby helping to reduce warming. More broadly, this region plays a key role in regulating the Earth's climate as a whole. Sea-ice melting can therefore only speed up global warming...

This is all the more true when we realise that, in addition to these direct phenomena, others are occurring – more complex but no less real – such as the release of a significant amount of the greenhouse gases currently stored in the frozen soil in Arctic regions, which will in turn speed up global warming. In addition to the harmful effects this is having on human settlements – which I have seen for myself on buildings in the cities of northern Canada for example –, melting permafrost (which has already begun, particularly in Siberia) will release large quantities of methane, which will also exacerbate global warming.

The cumulative result of these phenomena, of course, will be to weaken still further this region as valuable as it is precarious. In these areas highly subject to climatic constraints, climate change has particularly serious consequences.

Ecological consequences, of course: alterations in biological cycles, weakening of certain species or the proliferation of new ones upsetting the natural balance.

But climate change also has a huge impact on human activities in the region.

These primarily concern indigenous peoples – populations that have been present in the Arctic for centuries and which have built cultures and ways of life in these inhospitable, ice-bound regions. At a time when the

climate, and with it the flora and fauna of the Arctic, is being turned upside down, it is often their entire life balance that is at risk.

Especially since the advent of less extreme climatic conditions in the Arctic opens up many possibilities for economic development, which could be interesting for the welfare of these populations, while at the same time posing serious threats to the balance of the region.

We are talking primarily about new trade routes, hitherto blocked by ice, and which are now opening up more and more.

In the absence of suitable restrictions, the development of maritime traffic in these regions, particularly for the transporting of oil, poses the risk of unprecedented disasters. We know that an oil spill in the Arctic Ocean would be particularly difficult to manage, due to the extreme weather conditions, the effects of temperature on the oil and the lack of sufficient resources close by. In the world's most fragile ecosystems, a situation such as this would undoubtedly have tragic and irreversible consequences.

Fossil fuel extraction poses similar if not more serious problems. It is estimated that one third of the planet's untapped oil deposits are found in and around the Arctic Basin. These deposits, which, furthermore, tend to lie at a lesser depth than in other seas, are understandably much coveted; extraction operations pose a risk and could only be considered if serious environmental safeguards were in place.

More broadly, many resources – not just energy but also minerals, with large deposits of rare earths, and fish – are now potentially exploitable in the Arctic, and are arousing interest, with as yet very few controls in place.

All this poses a major threat to the whole region and, beyond that, our entire planet, whose balance depends to a large extent on these sensitive areas. However, the means of action available to us are limited.

This is partly due to the coastal states' legitimate exercise of sovereignty over much of the region. Although the Arctic, as I have said, concerns the whole of humanity, this unique global dimension does not obscure the fact that it is shared, and sometimes fought over, by the coastal powers.

These have been brought together since 1996 in the Arctic Council, which also includes representatives of indigenous peoples. The shortcomings of this institution have often been pointed out: its closed nature, lack of coercive power, the secondary role played by indigenous peoples and the timidity of its decisions have all been highlighted. At a time when the future of the Arctic seems increasingly uncertain, I would like to qualify these remarks.

The Arctic Council is a young institution whose history remains to be written. However, this forum has evolved in a very positive way in recent years. The Council's first binding agreement was adopted in 2011 – a treaty covering the coordination of search and rescue operations in the Arctic. Above all, it is currently the only suitable framework capable of maintaining a dialogue between competing powers and interests.

This space for dialogue must therefore be preserved, with of course possible improvements. But I am pleased to note that it is attracting more and more interest, as evidenced by the willingness of the new observer states to sit on the Council. When powers such as China, admitted as an observer this year, or the European Union, put their energies into a forum like this, I think we have good reason to feel pleased.

The growing involvement of actors who hitherto had little interest in the fate of the Arctic also improves the chances of the issues being taken seriously by other multilateral fora.

In particular, it allows us to hope that, at the very least, a code of practice for the Arctic can one day be established. Of course, this will not be a carbon copy of the Antarctic Treaty, which has protected the other Pole for more than sixty years. The political, geographical and human realities involved are too different. But we can legitimately hope to establish an agreement that allows for sustainable regulation of commercial and military activities in the Arctic, while at the same time reaffirming high-level scientific and environmental objectives.

Until these changes happen, which will of course take time and require effort, given the difficulties involved in these far-reaching initiatives, we must step up our smaller-scale actions.

In this respect we must support the many initiatives to create national parks and designated areas already underway, for example in Canada and Russia. And in the same vein, I am also campaigning for the establishment of marine protected areas.

I hope that many such areas can be established in the Arctic, particularly the Lancaster Sound scheme for which my Foundation is supporting the work of the Pew Environment Trust and the Canadian Boreal Initiative.

I also hope to see protected areas set up elsewhere, for example around Franz Josef Land, a former Soviet military zone which has now been liberated. This at any rate has been the subject of the exchanges I've had with President Putin, who seemed to me to be open to an initiative of this nature.

Finally, still with the aim of fostering local solutions, I want to emphasise the importance of helping the indigenous peoples of the region, who possess vital knowledge and have the right to determine their future there.

That is why for several years I have been supporting through my foundation the University of the Arctic initiative, which, through education, gives the people of the far north the means to remain in control of their destiny. At a time when the Arctic is attracting new economic interests which need to be controlled, and when a new green economy is being established, these peoples must have access to progress and freedom.

Mobilising multilateral fora, stepping up local initiatives, supporting indigenous peoples – these, Ladies and Gentlemen, are the things we can do to permanently protect the Arctic, enabling it to adapt to climate change, and at the same time protect our planet, because the two go hand-in-hand.

If we abandon the Arctic, then we abandon all hope of preserving our biodiversity and our environment. But if we safeguard the Arctic, I have no doubt that this will herald a new commitment: to ensure the future of the Earth.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Sir Winston Churchill spoke in these terms about establishing peace in the world: “All that is needed is the resolve of hundreds of millions of men and women to do right instead of wrong and to gain as their reward blessing instead of cursing.”

The task ahead is undoubtedly vast, but I do not think it is more impossible than the one Mr Churchill was talking about back then. Like him, I put my trust in the millions of our contemporaries to lead us towards hope and ensure the future of the Arctic and the planet as a whole.

This is what drives me every day, and explains why I am here today.

Thank you.