

# Indigenous lessons on how to harvest a polar bear: Exploring sustainability and sense-making in a post-growth economy

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*This paper applies Karl Weick's notion of sense-making to an Indigenous setting — the Indigenous Inuit population of East Greenland. The paper explores Indigenous sense-making of nature by analyzing Indigenous traditions of hunting and harvesting polar bears. The paper identifies three principles that guide this practice: one relating to governance, another to rewards, and finally one that pertains to insurance. The paper considers these three principles and evaluates their ability to contribute to our understanding of sustainability and a post-growth economy.*

## Introduction

This paper explores Indigenous sense-making of nature and analyses how it offers insights into a post-growth economy. In doing this, it employs Karl Weick's theory of sense-making to an Indigenous setting – the Indigenous Inuit population of East Greenland – and takes its methodological inspiration from Barbara Czarniawska's method of shadowing.

There are several studies that link studies of growth including a critique thereof, with studies into Indigenous peoples. This is clearly evident in for instance the research done on entrepreneurship. These studies explore the promise that entrepreneurship holds for rebuilding Indigenous communities both culturally, socially and economically, contributing to the emerging research agenda on Indigenous entrepreneurship. The notion of Indigenous entrepreneurship captures a distinct form of entrepreneurship that is fundamentally different from others - entrepreneurship that is community-based as opposed to one based on a single (heroic) individual or a family (Cummings & Jesse, 2022; Peredo et. al. 2004; Peredo & McLean, 2010).

Studies into Indigenous entrepreneurship unfold the interplay between Indigenous culture and identity on one hand and an entrepreneurial market economy on the other. Deliberations on Indigenous entrepreneurship are, in turn, closely associated with the analysis of enterprise communities, such as Ana Maria Peredo's research conducted with Indigenous peoples in three Andean countries. Her research unfolds how communities can be actively corporate as both entrepreneurs and enterprises in the pursuit of the common good (Peredo, 2003).

This paper takes its inspiration from and contributes to the Indigenous entrepreneurship research agenda. Drawing on the works of Barbara Czarniawska and Karl Weick, the paper follows the action instead of the actor, thus advocating an action-focused and process-oriented approach (Czarniawska, 2004; Weick, 1995; see also Lichterman, 2020). Against this background, the paper engages with the hunting and sharing of the catch of polar bears in East Greenland and analyses it using Karl Weick's theory of sense-making. The paper employs the term 'harvesting' to capture the cultural, social and economic aspects of how to share the catch, i.e. the polar bear. It does so with the aim to explore how Indigenous lessons on how to harvest a polar bear offer insight into sense-making in a post-growth economy.

In recent years, alternatives to growth have received growing scholarly attention. These alternatives cover but are not limited to the notions of green growth, de-growth and post-growth. They have in common a critical perspective on economic growth linking it to environmental degradation under capitalism. However, they differ in other aspects. Green growth seeks to decouple environmental degradation from economic growth by improving the efficiency of production through technological and market innovations (Sandberg, et. al. 2019; Bauhardt, 2014). So, green growth offers a catalogue of potential improvements to capitalism rather than a critique of it. In contrast, de-growth calls for a substantial reduction in growth especially in the western part of the world, while post-growth invites us to reflect on the growth imperative completely.

These debates open up a critique that is not limited to capitalism, production and consumption under capitalism, or the organisation of capitalist society (Baker, 2019, Chandler, 2018). In this perspective, it makes little difference what is heralded as the causal drivers of environmental degradation. Regardless of where scholars position themselves and highlight capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, mass consumerism, modernity or enlightenment, as a primary cause, the conclusion is common across them (Chandler, 2019; Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2017). There is no longer a separation between humans, nature, and culture (Chandler, 2019; Baker, 2019, Colebrooke, 2014).

The present paper engages with growth and a critique thereof from a profoundly empirical point of departure. Following Czarniawska method of shadowing and furthermore her engagement with the work of Weick, this is an invitation to reflect 'on your feet' (Czarniawska, 2005b). This implies that one needs to engage with Indigenous people and their practices, not as examples of alternative futures, but as a way of life that exists. While this approach sees Indigenous peoples as embedded in nature, it does not in any way include portraying Indigenous people as having a unique bond to nature or being guardians of nature. The latter constitutes an approach that may easily involve the kind of romanticism that tends to prevail in colonial and some post-colonial accounts of indigeneity (Sejersen, 2004). In contrast, the present analysis of Indigenous sense-making of nature taps into the collapse in the separation between man and nature and the insights that this offer into a post-growth economy (Brincker, 2017; Böhme, 1989).

First, the paper presents the theoretical framework by drawing upon the scholarship of Karl Weick focusing especially on Weick's notion of sense-making. The paper then turns to the case and briefly introduces the reader to the setting and context, and furthermore to shadowing as a method. This brings us to the analysis, which focuses on two key elements of sense-making in the process of hunting and harvesting a polar bear: identity construction seen as a social and on-going process and the enactment of sensible environments. The paper concludes by evaluating the potential of the study to contribute to our understanding of a post-growth economy.

### **The theoretical framework: Karl Weick's theory of sense-making**

The notion of sense-making is part of Weick's broader theoretical contribution to the study of organisations which hinges on three central concepts: enactment, sense-making, and heedfulness (often referred to as mindfulness). The enactment theory states that when humans act, they bring structures and events into existence and set them in action. This forms the basis of a social-constructivist perspective on organisations. It offers a view that directs attention away from the organisation seen as an entity towards the continual

processes through which organisations are brought into life. It is an approach where the analytical gaze of the observer shifts from the organisation to organising. The notion of sense-making is central to our understanding of organising, because it allows us to understand the process through which meaning is ascribed to experience. In doing so, it offers insights into what enables action.

Weick sees sense-making as a process that is: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environment, social, on-going, focused on and by extracted cues, and finally driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995: 17). These seven elements collectively shed light on the relationship between the individual and the environment. A key insight from Weick's work on sense-making is that shared meaning is not what is crucial in collective action. What is crucial is the experience of shared action. It follows that Weick does not work with a distinction between an individual mind and the collective mind. The collective mind precedes the individual mind. Hence, there can be no individual or single sense-maker (Weick & Roberts, 1993: 360). What a situation means is defined by who we become while dealing with the situation and, what or who we represent. This leads us to understand the individual as a person who is completely and fully embedded in the social i.e. there is no individuality before social life.

In recent years, the notion of sense-making has seen a revival and it has been applied to studies that engage with organising under extreme conditions and circumstances — such as extreme weather and natural disasters (Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). Acknowledging that sense-making of ecological conditions is not a dominant concern within mainstream organisation literature, Whiteman and Cooper stress the need to embrace the power of materiality (Orlikowsky, 2007; Suchman, 2005). They recognise that local inter-generational knowledge of ecosystems often enables people to make sense of and respond effectively to ecological change and surprise. However, ecological sense-making is not straightforward. The ability to make sense of nature, often in the spur of the moment, and respond sensibly requires that people are 'ecologically embedded'. According to the authors, people who possess the quality of being ecologically embedded are those 'who are deeply rooted in "the land" in a physical and cultural way' (Whiteman & Cooper, 2011: 890). Those who do not have this characteristic are likely to suffer from its absence when they need to respond quickly and heedfully/mindfully to changes in the natural world. As a result, those who are not ecologically embedded and do not have ecological sense-making abilities become highly vulnerable when confronted with surprises that originate from the local ecology (Whiteman & Cooper, 2011:891). With this in mind, the authors call for more research into acts and instances of sense-making of an ecologically material world.

## **Case and Context**

### **Colony and County**

Greenland is the largest island in the world with its 2,166,000 km<sup>2</sup>. It is inhabited by approximately 55,000 people, who live along the coastline with a predominance of settlements on the central west coast. Greenland is often considered to be both North American and European. Geographically, it is part of the North American continent. However, given that Greenland was a Danish colony for more than 200 years (1721-1953), a Danish county for more than 20 years (1953-1979), and is part of the Danish Realm (Rigsfællesskabet), Greenland is also considered part of the Nordic countries, constituting the Arctic dimension. In recent years, the relationship between Greenland and Denmark and especially the colonial history has received a lot of attention among scholars and lay people alike. A consensus seems to be emerging that Danish colonial policies have been guided by ideas of protective paternalism and that these ideas have been facilitated by a unique bond between mission and trade. The policies effectively sealed off Greenland from the outside world and endorsed parts of traditional Inuit lifestyles that were seen fit, while replacing elements that were regarded unfit (Rud, 2014; Thisted, 2005, 2009, 2014).

Under pressure from the United Nations, to allow the introduction of popular sovereignty, in 1953 Greenland's status was changed and the island went from being a Danish colony to being a Danish county.

In doing this, Greenland took a road very different from most other colonies that became independent. With the change in status from Danish colony to Danish county, it became a key priority for Denmark to assimilate Greenland into the Danish welfare state which was created during the same period. The new policies had pronounced implications for the social structures in Greenland as the country went through a rapid modernisation process in areas such as health, housing, and education (Rud, 2014).

In 1979, as a response to a national and ethno-political movement that emerged in the 1960s, Greenland acquired Home Rule. Its autonomy was further increased in 2009 with the Self-Government Act (Selvstyre). The Self-Government Act stands out by granting the government of Greenland the right to declare the country independent. It thus recognises the people of Greenland as a people with a right to self-determination. Furthermore, the Act allows the government of Greenland the right to assume legislative power over major policy areas. However, there are exceptions to this rule, most notably foreign and security policy.

East Greenland is the most sparsely populated area of Greenland with only 3,000 inhabitants. Tasiilaq is, by Greenlandic standards, the only large town in this vast geographical area and has approximately 2000 people living there. East Greenlanders speak a distinct dialect that qualifies as a language unique to the region. However, it does not have the status of a minority language. In addition to differing from West Greenland in terms of language, East Greenland also has a different cultural and a shorter colonial history. East Greenland was colonised in the late 1880s while the rest of the country was colonised much earlier in 1721. This left East Greenland relatively more isolated than West Greenland. Also, the county years, i.e. 1953-1979, were experienced differently in East Greenland compared to the western region. Denmark's attempt to modernise Greenland and assimilate Greenland into the Danish welfare state focused primarily on West Greenland. As a result, Indigenous practices in hunting and fishing are relatively more prevalent and dominant in East Greenland. This extends to practices for hunting and harvesting polar bears.

### **Indigeneity and Isolation**

Greenland belongs to the Inuit people, who are recognised as an Indigenous People. In contrast to many Indigenous Peoples, Greenlandic Inuit constitutes the majority population of Greenland, and the majority of the population speaks the Inuit language, Greenlandic.

For many years, the Greenlandic Inuit have expressed hopes to be fully independent from Denmark one day, thus leaving the Danish Realm. A main obstacle to achieve this end derives from the fact that Greenland is economically dependent on Denmark. The Danish annual block grant constitutes about 50 per cent of the country's national budget. The hope to declare itself independent and to become the first Inuit nation state taps into the concept of Indigenous People and how to define 'Indigenous People'. Several attempts to offer a definition have been presented and they share the emphasis on Indigenous Peoples' non-dominant position being vital to our understanding of this particular group of people (Mortensen & Barten, 2016).

As Greenland gradually gains more autonomy and detaches itself from its former colonial ruler Denmark, a question emerges: Do the people of Greenland continue to be non-dominant and qualify as an Indigenous People? Furthermore, given the vast regional differences in Greenland that involve both culture, language and socio-economics, it is possible that some parts of the Greenlandic population are non-dominant (and thus Indigenous) whereas as others are not. Domination/non-domination are fundamental to our understanding of indigeneity. If the former colonial ruler, i.e. Denmark, is taken out of the equation, and with relations of domination/non-domination playing out internally in Greenland, are the people of Greenland still an Indigenous People? Or may it be that when judged by the token of dominance / non-dominance, only parts of the population constitute an Indigenous People?

These questions are by no means just academic. In the early 2000s, the people living in Thule, i.e. the population in the northern part of the country, took legal action to be recognised as an Indigenous People distinct from the people of Greenland (Hastrup, 2007, 2009). The Danish Supreme Court ruled that the

people of Greenland constitute one people, specifically one Indigenous People. However, the hope continues to linger, spurred on by the movement towards independence, and it is not limited to the Thule population. It is also present in East Greenland. The question therefore remains - at what point does the balance tip from being non-dominant to being dominant. Furthermore, when it tips, does it do so for the entire population of Greenland or does Greenland contain several peoples, some being Indigenous in the sense of being non-dominant, while others are not (Mortensen & Barten, 2016)? In the present context, it is vital to recall that in contrast to 'a people' or 'a minority', Indigenous Peoples have certain rights relating to self-determination and to living and non-living natural resources (Mortensen & Barten, 2016). These include the rights of Indigenous Peoples to hunt, for instance, seals and polar bears.

## Methods: Shadowing in East Greenland

The motivation for carrying out research in one of the most remote and isolated parts of Greenland stems from a research project that the author conducted into Indigenous entrepreneurship and education in East Greenland (2016-2018).

The study took a point of departure in Barbara Czarniawska's method of shadowing. However, the researchers used it in a diluted form as we did not spend extensive periods of time (6-12 months) in the field. Instead, we had regular shorter stays. Shadowing was reported in field notes and narratives. Albeit, we used shadowing in a diluted form, Czarniawska's approach remained the central source of inspiration throughout the research.

The notion of mobility lies at the core of Barbara Czarniawska's work on shadowing as a method to study "the work and life of mobile people" (Czarniawska, 2007: 17). Czarniawska calls for a mobile ethnography of people who move often and quickly. Consequently, she advocates not to follow the actor but to engage with action nets of actors that are under constant change (Czarniawska, 2004; Latour, 2007). Czarniawska makes a point of the fact that shadowing is more than a technique. It is a mindset that offers different insights. Shadowing requires that the researcher takes a step back in order to observe. Ironically, in order to take this step back, the researcher has to step into the field and become part of it. Only then, according to Czarniawska, does observation in the true manner of shadowing become possible (Czarniawska, 2007: 9).

This raises the question of how the observed responds to the more or less constant presence of the observer. Based on the experience derived from the present study, the observed generally tend to ignore the observer after a very short period of time. While being ignored as an observer might be very attractive in the context of shadowing, this should not be considered an indication of, or invitation to 'going native'. Stepping into the field and going native are two very different things. The former allows the researcher to observe and capture that, which escapes the eye of the observed. The latter signifies the point at which the researcher has spent so much time in the field that he/she begins to take things, events and comments for granted (Czarniawska, 2007: 27-28).

The above considerations are particularly relevant in the context of research on/with Indigenous peoples, especially given the context of colonisation. The author of this paper is a Danish national and thus, in the eyes of the local community associated with Denmark, the former colonial ruler (Smith, 2012). It raises the question of whether non-Indigenous researchers in general and nationals from the former colonial power in particular can be involved in accurate Indigenous research (Crothers, 2014). For this study, the attempt was to avoid two pitfalls: one was the risk of producing research that ascribes a particularly privileged position to an underprivileged group, calling for a mobilisation for and protection of the group's interests, i.e. so-called 'standpoint theorists' (Crothers, 2014). The other was not to engage in research that could potentially endanger the cultural particularity of the Indigenous group in question by intruding in the community. With this in mind, shadowing lends itself as a highly conducive method because it allows the researcher to balance stepping into the field and remain distant from it at the same time.

## How to harvest a polar bear

The population of polar bears is not evenly distributed in Greenland. The vast majority can be found in the northern and eastern parts of Greenland. During the summer, polar bears follow their prey such as seals through the East coast of Greenland. Summer is, in other words, the season for hunting polar bears.

The Inuit people in the northern and eastern parts of Greenland have hunted polar bears for centuries. In addition to seal and fish, polar bears constitute part of the Inuit diet. To this particular group, hunting and harvesting polar bears is embedded in their Indigenous way of life and world view.

There are specific traditions connected to hunting and harvesting polar bears. For instance, the person who spots the bear first has the right to the animal's skin. This is fixed. So, if a child, an elderly person, or a woman spot the bear first the skin is theirs, even though they do not participate in hunting the polar bear. Typically, however, it is a hunter that spots the bear first — as polar bears rarely come near villages or towns.

Sharing the bear's meat is guided by tradition and hunters try to observe these traditions even today. Typically, the hunter who spots the bear first also shoots it. Apart from the skin, which is the reward he may claim for having spotted the bear first, he gets the head, meat from the chest bone, and meat from the central part of the bear which is measured as the piece from the fifth rib from the top to the rib fifth from the bottom. If the bear is killed as part of a hunting expedition, the bear's limbs are divided equally among the remaining hunters. The intestines, which are considered a delicacy and an important source of nutrition, are divided among all the participating hunters (Møller, 2007).

Interestingly, if hunters who have not participated in the hunt happen to pass by, they also get their share of meat. They may claim the meat from the hip and the tail. Sometimes this piece of meat is also taken back to the village or town and offered to an old hunter who is no longer able to participate in hunting expeditions. This is considered a sign of respect (Møller, 2007).

The rule that the meat is shared both among participating hunters and passer-by hunters is not limited to the polar bear. It applies to all the types of large prey. For instance, in the case of narwhales, the tradition is that boats that happen to pass by the hunting scene may toss a stone or a cartridge on to the buoy that holds the whale afloat and thus claim a piece of meat from the belly of the whale. So, the traditions that guide the sharing of prey are not limited to polar bears. They are also not limited to East Greenland. Similar traditions exist in Northern Greenland, albeit with local variations.

## Sense-making and how to harvest a polar bear

The first insight to be derived from Indigenous lessons on how to hunt and harvest a polar bear pertains to the interaction between the individual and the collective mind. In this context, the understanding that there can be no individual sense-maker is vital. The collective mind precedes the individual mind. What a situation means is defined by who we become while dealing with the situation — such as the person who first spotted the bear or the former hunter who can no longer hunt. This process of identity construction is social and on-going.

Against this backdrop, Indigenous practices connected to harvesting a polar bear involve an element of governance. Key to this governance is preventing conflicts arising among hunters over dividing and sharing scarce resources. For this reason, they clarify who gets the skin and the head of the bear, the two most-precious parts of the animal, and who is entitled to what portion of meat. Governance also pertains to external relations i.e. to passers-by, because it clarifies that they have a right to claim a piece from the less attractive part of the animal, the hip.

When engaging with Indigenous practices as movement and patterning of social form rather than as system or structure, these social practices are linked to questions of organising, and processes of sense-making that give meaning to organising. Hence, they allow us to understand the significance of these elements of

governance in the context of a post-growth economy. The aim of governance is to prevent conflict arising over scarce resources.

The social and on-going process of identity construction is clearly expressed in the granting of rewards. Indigenous lessons on how to harvest a polar bear include insights into rewards that relate to the risk associated with spotting and shooting a polar bear. For example, the hunter who does so gets the skin and head — parts of the animal that are considered most attractive — as well as a significant portion of the meat. However, rewards extend to the entire group and to by-passers as well. Hence, while they are granted to particular individuals, they do not cater to an underlying understanding of individuality. Instead, these lessons are embedded in identity construction that acknowledges and seeks to promote actions, and rewards risk taking in the context of human survival not as individuals but as species living along with other species in a space that is social and where resources are scarce.

The system of rewards extends to former hunters who no longer have the capacity to hunt. At first glance, this may appear to be a social welfare scheme. However, the scheme is limited to retired hunters; it does not cover all elderly people in the group. So instead of envisioning this as a welfare scheme, it is more apt to perceive this particular reward system as an old-age insurance scheme targeted towards former hunters.

The distinction between social welfare and an insurance scheme is very important in the present context, as it taps into the rationale that informs this system. In the case of social welfare, the system is informed by rights and duties that are assigned to particular individuals. In the case of an insurance scheme, the rationale that underpins the system can be described as an act that motivates a particular type of behaviour over time. And so, the hunters who bring meat back to the old hunter do so anticipating that young hunters will, in the future, do the same for them when they are too old to go hunting. The act involves an expectation of reciprocity (Elster, 1992).

The distinction between a social welfare regime and an insurance scheme is significant for the discussion on individuality and its place - or lack thereof - in Indigenous lessons on how to harvest a polar bear. When exploring the act of bringing part of the prey back to former hunters, it becomes clear that this particular act relies on neither altruism nor self-interest. Instead, it is an act that spans and links the past, the present, and the future and is grounded in the social and on-going process of identity construction.

Another insight to be derived from Indigenous practices connected to the hunting and harvesting of polar bears relates to the environment, specifically, in Weick's notion of sense-making in relation to the material world: the enactment of sensible environments. The enactment of sensible environments implies that, following Weick, people produce the environment that they face. There is no fixed environment according to Weick. People are part of their own environments, which they produce by acting in it (Weick, 1995: 31). In saying this, Weick is not implying that there is no material world outside our cognition. Only that when we focus on it, we enact it and construct it socially. In doing so, we construct sensible environments. This extends to the enactment of the natural environment which Whiteman and Cooper seek to capture with the notion of ecological sense-making. In the particular case of Indigenous lessons on how to harvest a polar bear, sense-making of the natural environment or ecological sense-making means that the polar bear is enacted as prey i.e. an animal to be hunted and harvested in order to get food. It also means that other enactments are possible. One such example is from West Greenland, where the polar bear is enacted as a sacred animal and a national symbol. This is clearly expressed in the fact that a roaring polar bear is the symbol of the government of Greenland (Naalakkersuisut). Another is in the context of the wider world where images of starving polar bears are typically enacted as symbols of environment degradation stemming from the economic growth of the western world.

The above-mentioned three enactments of the polar bear as prey, sacred animal and national symbol, and finally a symbol of environmental degradation, are part of cognition that involves sustainability. However, in the context of Indigenous practices, it would be a mistake to conceptualise sustainability as the polar

bear's sustainability as a species. Among the Indigenous Inuit population in East Greenland, sustainability pertains to humans. It pertains to the Indigenous people living there. In recent decades, this group has seen the effects of climate change first hand. They have seen bears that earlier would not come near towns or villages now wander through these places in search of food as they have been deprived of their prey such as seals. Illorqortormiut, the northernmost town in East Greenland has been especially bothered by the continuing appearance of groups of polar bears.

Among the Indigenous people living in East Greenland, sustainability is the sustainability of humans placed in a nature that is socially constructed in the ways that the livelihood of living resources such as the polar bear is fundamental for the sustainability of humans. This is in the sense that the enactment of sensible environments involves the sustainability of humans as a species as opposed to the sustainability and self-preservation of sovereign individuals.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper set out to explore how Indigenous lessons on how to harvest a polar bear offer insight into sense-making in a post-growth economy. Taking its inspiration in Czarniawska's method of shadowing, her call for a mobile ethnography and the concomitant point to follow the action rather than the actor, the paper integrated research conducted into entrepreneurship and education at state school in East Greenland with an analysis of the social practices involved in the hunting and harvesting of polar bears in that region. In exploring and unfolding these practices, the paper has drawn on Karl Weick's theory of sense-making, in particular the process of identity construction and the enactment of sensible environments.

The paper has identified elements of governance and compensation that underpin how the meat and the skin of the bear is divided both internally within the group of hunters and in relation to passers-by. It has discussed the rationale that informs rewards, unfolding how they seek to motivate particular actions such as risk taking. Rewards are not limited to the present moment but extend to former hunters and also to the future; they involve an expectation of reciprocation and are firmly embedded in the collective mind.

The question that remains to be addressed is how Indigenous lessons on how to harvest a polar bear offer insight into sense-making in a post-growth economy and how these insights may contribute to the emerging research agenda on Indigenous entrepreneurship. The paper argues that Indigenous practices can facilitate such insights by enabling us to envision commons that are profoundly social in their conceptualisation. Relationality is key to this understanding. When engaging with Indigenous practices as movement and patterning of social form rather than as system or structure, these social practices are linked to questions of organising, and processes of sense-making that give meaning to organising. At the heart of this is the recognition that the collective mind precedes the individual mind.

Weick's works are dedicated to analysing processes of sense-making, including how people enact their own environment — both social and natural. To the extent that it makes sense to speak of sustainability in relation to this collective, it pertains to humans as a species, and not to sovereign individuals. The question is one of not becoming extinct as a species as opposed to self-preservation of the individual.

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