

# Voyage of Discovery

By Elizabeth Judge

A distinguished group explores the impact of climate change on one of the planet's most fragile — and remarkable — places.

In late July, high in the Atlantic Arctic and well inside the Arctic Circle — in a place where walrus, polar bears, and seals still outnumber humans, and the mid-night sun sets over a horizon of seemingly endless fjords — the *National Geographic Endeavour* set sail on an expedition that was life-changing for many aboard. Surrounding the ship were some of the most remote environs and rare wildlife on the planet: polar bears feeding, walrus colonies, grazing reindeer, and an entire ecosystem of interconnected species under the surface of the sea ice. On board were 55 leaders in government, business, science, economics, and academia, including former President Jimmy Carter, former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, former eBay CEO and John McCain presidential campaign co-chair Meg Whitman, Monsanto CEO Hugh Grant, Google co-founder Larry Page, CNN founder and businessman Ted Turner, and oceanographer Sylvia Earle, among others. The expedition — led by the Institute's Energy and Environment Program, the National Geographic Society, and the sustainable tour outfit Lindblad Expeditions — was designed to help this influential group learn more about climate change in the Arctic, assess its impact first-hand, and explore possibilities for international collaboration and solutions.



Former President Jimmy Carter, former Senator Tom Daschle, and Google co-founder Larry Page were among the leaders assembled for the educational voyage.





Sven-Olof Lindblad, founder and president of Lindblad Expeditions, which partnered with National Geographic and the Aspen Institute to lead this expedition, photographs some of the whale remains that populate the southwest region of Spitzberg, once a hub of bowhead whale hunting.

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The expedition took participants from Oslo, Norway, to Longyearbyen, a western point of the Svalbard Archipelago, from which they set sail on the *Endeavour*, then around the Svalbard Archipelago, and into northernmost depths of the Norwegian Arctic. At the outset of the trip, at Oslo City Hall, Norwegian Minister for the Environment Erik Solheim set the tone for the following seven days, challenging especially his American audience members to take the lead. “What we are all, as Europeans and Norwegians, looking for is American leadership on climate change,” he said, “because without the intellectual, economic, and political power of the United States, there is no way we can succeed.”

Over the course of the eight-day voyage, the group took part in panel discussions on the science of Arctic climate change, US climate change policy, international leadership in climate change,

the economics of reducing worldwide carbon emissions, human rights and the environment, and the interconnection of climate change, security, and energy. They debated, brainstormed, and searched for new and collaborative approaches to protecting the Arctic’s habitats and ecosystems.

One enlightening stop was at the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, the secure home to millions of seed samples, or “emergency spares,” held in its frozen chambers, which are tunneled deep inside a frozen mountain. “One of the most important questions for the future is, is agriculture going to adapt to climate change?” asked Cary Fowler, executive director of the seed vault’s operating organization, the Global Crop Diversity Trust. “The answer is still out. It’s not a given, so it’s quite important for policymakers and other influential people to understand that we really need to get ready for climate change. ... We’re



Institute trustee Andy Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union, and his son Matt

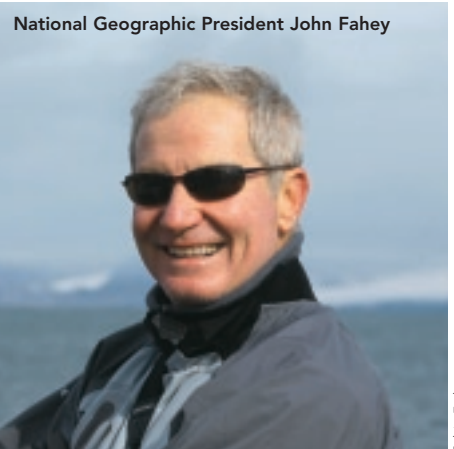
Sylvia Earle

not ready now, but we could be. This is a problem that can be solved.”

The trip’s naturalist team also led participants on awe-inspiring — and sometimes alarming — tours of the land- and seascapes. “Part of the beauty of this place is in its simplicity,” said one of the naturalists, Ian Bullock. “It is a barren landscape; it just seems like bare rock and ice when you first look at it. But the beauty is in the details. And everywhere we land, we find, once we focus, that there are both tiny plants and extraordinary creatures making a living here in the Arctic summer — and some of the best examples of adaptation to a harsh environment.”

For many on the trip, it was exactly those details that made their experience so powerful — and drove home the repercussions of human activity on the planet. Sights like barnacle geese feeding, humpback whales breaching, and a graveyard of abandoned bowhead whale bones that still litter a part of the island Spitzberg from hunting decades ago provoked reflection and thought. “This is a wake-up [call]. It’s hard to make it relevant to people who aren’t up here and concerned about this on a day-to-day basis, but it is a harbinger of things to come if we don’t get our act together,” said Julie Gerberding, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

For Madeleine Albright, the trip was a potent source of perspective on human beings’ relationship to the much larger context of the planet. “It’s a combination of powerful and majestic, and it’s overwhelming,” she said. “I have been



National Geographic President John Fahey

Sylvia Earle



Institute trustee and oceanographer Sylvia Earle observes a group of walrus.



Actor Chevy Chase, Sally Ranney, and CNN Founder Ted Turner

Steve Earle

in other situations where I have realized the power of nature, and I think as humans we underestimate that. And here, it is very visible.”

“When you realize that human beings have been here for the last few hundred years, but these rocks have been here for the last 500 million years, it’s pretty awe-inspiring,” said President Carter. “This particular trip has been the most enlightening experience I’ve ever had in my life.”

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Working across boundaries to find solutions was a mandate of the expedi-

tion, and one not taken lightly by those on the ship. A subset of the group, nine leaders representing a diverse group of global entities, comprised the Institute’s

new Aspen Commission on Arctic Climate Change, which had its first meeting as an organized body on the boat. There, the Commission shaped its objectives, mission, and timeline for pushing Arctic climate change to the forefront of the international policy community’s agenda. The Commission will continue to meet over the course of the next year and beyond, conducting an

analysis of Arctic governance and management and making recommendations to key groups in that arena.

While sea ice and glaciers melted

around them, the spirit of collaboration on the *Endeavour* provided hope to those who are charged in their everyday lives with providing hope to others. “For those of you who have worked in climate change for your entire lives, I think the time is now. The wind is at all of our backs ... perhaps for the first time in 30 or 40 years,” said a participant in one of the panel discussions. Echoed former Senator Tom Daschle: “One of the most wonderful things to me is to see people in this setting from very diverse lives who all walk away with the same extraordinary commitment and understanding that wouldn’t have otherwise been. There are conservatives, and liberals, and business people, and laborers, and evangelicals, and scientists here. And it’s amazing that you can take that diverse a crowd of people and walk off this boat a week later and say, ‘We’re together. We’re all in this together. We are one, regardless of our diversity.’” ♦

For more about this expedition, including the group’s joint statement on climate change, visit [www.aspeninstitute.org/ee](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/ee).



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