



No escape from climate change: Arctic citizen scientists self-isolate for another winter

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Polar Ambassadors Sunniva Sorby and Hilde Fålun Strøm pursue their mission to record and document climate change in the Arctic for another long winter.

Sorby and Strøm are the first women in history to have overwintered in the Arctic without men. They have spent the last winter isolated at the 78th parallel in the Norwegian Arctic archipelago of Svalbard, in a small uninsulated trapper's hut called "Bamsebu". With no running water or electricity, subjected to one of the harshest climates on earth, surrounded by polar bears and total darkness.

Their self-imposed isolation has had tremendous outreach: together with "Exploring by the seat of your pants," a global network for teaching across continents, they engaged with students worldwide in areas of science, exploration and education on topics that ranged from the aurora to global weather patterns. They also collected valuable data as citizen scientists on northern lights, marine plastics, cloud formations, ice, ocean water, phytoplankton, and wildlife. "We jumped in with our hearts in the ice last year to self-isolate, immerse in the cycles of change in the Arctic for 12 months, to observe, record and share stories," says Strøm.

But after a long, dark, polar night came the pandemic, which gave a new meaning to their expedition, and forced them to recalibrate the compass. Thus, their decision to extend their engagement for another winter. "Climate change does not take a break so neither are we. Our work is more relevant and vital during the pandemic with little field research being done," says Sorby.

Extreme events triggered by climate warming are increasing exponentially around the world, resulting in incessant wildfires, monster hurricanes, enormous species loss, and massive human displacement. "The stark beauty of our surroundings belies the fact that we are witnessing the devastating effects of the rapidly accelerating global climate crisis on almost a daily basis. This is a time to fully engage, not dis-engage," says Strøm and Sorby.

No place in the world will escape the impacts of climate change. It is a global crisis. Promoting more effective public engagement with climate science so people can actually take steps in their everyday lives to make themselves more secure is a critical moral imperative. As the pandemic has forced many to be isolated and disconnected from each other, Sorby and Strøm aim to provide meaningful content and inspiration to reconnect all of us back to the natural world around us, to be curious and to protect it.

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