

Involvement in the Arctic. The melting ice in the Arctic has far-reaching impacts – also on Switzerland. WSL's director Konrad Steffen and the ambassador Stefan Flückiger discuss climate refugees, the Arctic Council, and the race for raw materials.

Switzerland is far away from the Arctic but is nevertheless directly involved in research there. Why?

KS: There are many parallels between the polar regions and the Alps. Snow, glaciers and permafrost can be found in both, but at different altitudes and in different dimensions. Research into such phenomena first began in the Swiss Alps, and many of today's methods and measurement instruments were developed in Switzerland. This know-how can be used in polar research to find out, for example, more about what is happening to the ice masses in the Arctic.

Why is this important?

KS: If the large glaciers in Greenland melt due to climate change, the sea-level will rise further. Although this has no direct influence on land-locked Switzerland, indirectly it affects us greatly. It means that in coastal regions, particularly in Asia, many mega-cities will be submerged and thus become uninhabitable. This will result in streams of refugees, also towards Europe, where the standard of living is high.

How are politicians reacting to such forecasts?

SF: In politics, there is currently a fast growing awareness of the social impacts of climate change.

Clearly, the global developments will also affect Switzerland.

We cannot allow ourselves to ignore this. To prepare ourselves, we must understand the origins and interrelationships. This is where we need to rely on findings from research. For politicians, the task is to use these findings as much as possible to minimize the risks of climate change.

Switzerland has been a member with observer status of the Arctic Council, set up by the countries bordering the Arctic, since 2017. What were the motivations for becoming a member?

SF: The political importance of the Arctic is increasing. With the melting of the sea ice, new shipping routes have suddenly opened up, which shorten the time it takes to transport goods between Asia and Europe by a third. Enormous oilfields and mineral deposits have now become accessible and new fishing grounds in the Arctic Ocean can be exploited. It's therefore essential to clarify who these resources belong to and who may use them. Even countries far from the North Pole are declaring their interest. Thus China, Japan, India and Singapore have had observer status on the Arctic Council, which advises on the use of the Arctic, since 2013. The Federal Council realised that Switzerland should not



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Konrad Steffen, the Director of WSL, has been doing research in the Arctic and Antarctic for 40 years, where he has been investigating the effects of climate change.



The Swiss Camp in Greenland: This is where researchers at WSL spend several weeks each year studying the effects of climate change on the Arctic ice masses.

miss out on this development, and started its application to the Arctic Council in 2014.

Stefan Flückiger and Koni Steffen, you led the application campaign together. How did you find the cooperation?

SF: From my point of view, this is an ideal example of how research and politics can work hand in hand together. We really needed support from research for this undertaking. Koni's many international contacts, which he has built up during his work over the years, were very valuable. What was also crucial for the success of our application was that Switzerland's Arctic research has a very high reputation internationally. Its good standing is extremely important for Switzerland's policies.

KS: For me it was good to see how interested politicians are in our research results. This shows how relevant they are for society.

What benefits does being a member of the Arctic Council have?

KS: As researchers, we have been active for years in the Arctic Council's various workgroups that are especially scientifically oriented. It's new, however, for us to also have support for this work from politicians. This has increased the visibility of our scientific work.

SF: For Switzerland to be granted observer status is a sign of great recognition. Greece, Turkey and the EU applied at the same time and were rejected. Switzerland's application was accepted because it has not lodged any territorial claims in the Arctic and is, moreover, well

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known to be a reliable international partner. We were also able to convince the members of the Arctic Council of the high quality of Swiss research in the Arctic.

KS: I also think that Switzerland can, as a neutral country, act as a mediator when it is a matter of reconciling the interests of different countries.

But the application was surely not completely unselfish. What kind of economic interests is Switzerland pursuing here?

SF: One of the main tasks of Swiss foreign policy is to promote the Swiss economy. Having the status of an observer on the Arctic Council is useful in this respect as well. Switzerland is one of the most important locations for companies trading in raw materials. Should they want to be active in future in the Arctic, we can help them. We are, of course, aware of the international discussion about policies for raw materials. This is precisely why politicians will try to hold talks with such companies and assume a regulating role in terms of sustainability. Exactly what form this takes, however, will only become apparent in the future.

How strongly must the Arctic be protected?

KS: Complete protection like that in Antarctica is, I believe, not possible because Norway, Denmark, Russia, the USA and Canada already own and use parts of the Northern Arctic Ocean. We cannot prevent other countries also wanting to benefit from places where the ice is now melting. Using the new shipping routes even has advantages: Since they are much

shorter, less fuel is needed, which helps the climate. It is, however, important to make sure the Arctic is used sustainably.

SF: That's something I also consider essential. I don't believe it is just empty talk. Environmental awareness has, in the meantime, increased tremendously everywhere. It used, however, to be different. You notice this when you see, for example, the heavily polluted Russian coast and how it was forgotten after the Soviet Union collapsed. The newly awakened interest in the Arctic can also provide an opportunity to clear up such contaminated sites and do things better in future. *(cho)*