

OPINION

Arctic Ocean can become a highway

CAMBRIDGE, England — The Anchorage-based Institute of the North is hosting what some observers here believe is a historic workshop at the Scott Polar Research Institute, the world's premier Arctic research center. The subject has captured the attention of 50 of the world's top experts from 10 nations. They have gathered to discuss Arctic marine transportation and the possibility of altering world trade routes by sailing across the top of the globe.

Climate change is the catalyst for this remarkable gathering. The retreat of Arctic sea ice has focused renewed attention on the Arctic Ocean as a potential water highway — coastal and regional as well as trans-Arctic. If feasible, it would save thousands of miles for waterborne cargo, reducing costs and improving the living conditions of those who live along the route, including Alaskans.

In previous centuries, this dream inspired Capt. James Cook, Roald Amundsen and other visionaries to risk their lives to find the elusive Northwest Passage.

For 100 years, the Russians have pioneered the Northern Sea Route across the top of their immense country, using the world's most powerful icebreakers and a fleet of ice-armored cargo ships. For most of the last century, the cold environment combined with the Cold War to block this maritime corridor from wider use. These obstacles, however, are no longer deal breakers, and a true northern vision is back on the drawing boards.

This session was organized by three Alaskans: Lawson Brigham, deputy director of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission and a former ice breaker captain who holds a Ph.D. from Scott Polar; Ben Ellis, managing director of the Institute of the North; and Walt Parker, conservationist, transportation expert and chairman of the Circumpolar Infrastructure Task Force, which is

funding this event.

High-powered panels are discussing sea ice challenges, shipping economics, technology, international cooperation and marine safety. The results will be a summary of the opportunities ahead of us and a list of the toughest questions that remain unanswered. For instance, can sovereignty issues be resolved, as well as financing, insurance and environmental concerns?

It's fitting that this gathering is taking place at Cambridge. It was here eight years ago that a group of professors inspired me to found the Institute of the North. Dr. Piers Vitebsky of Scott Polar invited me to the campus to discuss the Alaska economic/political model that I call the Owner State — a unique combination of a free-enterprise business climate, a democratic political system, and public ownership of lands and resources.

During that visit to Cambridge, Vitebsky and his colleagues grilled me for five hours one evening. I spoke about the commons of the North, our commonly owned resources, and how to use them to benefit local peoples and regions, not just outside economic and political forces.

The next morning at breakfast, they said; "We have taught math, science, philosophy and nearly all other subjects at Cambridge since the 13th century, but no one teaches what you described yesterday. We want to help."

**WALLY
HICKEL**

COMMENT



These obstacles are no longer deal breakers, and a true northern vision is back on the drawing boards.

Encouraged, I returned to Alaska and founded the Institute of the North, first at Alaska Pacific University, and now as a stand-alone nonprofit corporation. A few years later, my Cambridge friends encouraged me to write a textbook about what we were researching and teaching. "Crisis in the Commons: the Alaska Solution" was published in 2002.

When this maritime workshop concludes, we will launch the Russian edition of this book in Moscow. Mikhail Nikolaev, the vice-speaker of the Russian Duma's upper house, and Alexander Granberg, leading academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences, have both written introductions to the Russian edition. Nikolaev writes of our association through the Northern Forum and our many discussions about sustainable development in northern regions. Granberg calls the book "especially timely for Russia."

I hope so. Russia and Alaska are historically linked. We are a family of one. It's time we worked more closely and learned from each other. Indeed, it has begun. Eight of Russia's top Arctic experts, including Granberg, have joined us for this workshop in Cambridge this week. The day of the Arctic has come.

■ Walter J. Hickel served as governor of Alaska from 1966 to 1968 and from 1990 to 1994 as well as secretary of the Interior from 1969 to 1970. He is the founder of the Institute of the North and the secretary-general of the 24-region Northern Forum.