‘Arctic, fragile vessel of nature, sustainable heritage’

“As a civilization, we need to grow up and stop pushing the boundaries of nature that is intolerable and unsustainable. Let’s not put greed, money and economic development before fresh air, clean water and vibrant healthy communities.”

By Joel Lee  |  Published : Nov 13, 2017 - 20:03

Canadian scientist John England has spent over 50 summers across Canada’s Arctic, painstakingly surveying its ecosystem and evolution from the Ice Age to present day.

The 70-year-old University of Alberta professor emeritus in earth and atmospheric sciences described being there as a sort of “religious experience.”

“Going to the Arctic is like taking a ‘behavioral bath,’ shedding all life’s problems,” he told The Korea Herald at the Canadian Embassy in Seoul on Nov. 7 ahead of the Canada-Korea Arctic Symposium.

“You come with your body covered with life’s ‘barnacles,’ the tensions, discontents and baggage. Amid the Arctic’s vast emptiness and silence, you sweep them away and experience who you truly are deep underneath the trappings of modern life, the distractions, noise, fragmentation and industrialization.”

“In the environment of sacredness,” he added, “You appreciate what matters the most.”

England stressed that the polar zone is under threat of climate and environmental changes more acutely than any other place on earth. He asked for the global community’s “shared love” of the natural environment over material aggrandizement.

His research has focused on the history of ancient ice sheets, ocean and lake sediments, ocean currents and sea levels, providing a long-term perspective on climate change. He won the prestigious $50,000 Weston Family Prize for Lifetime Achievement in Northern Research last December for his lifelong dedication to the increasingly precarious and precious region.

The scholar is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, having proposed and played an instrumental role in creating Canada’s northernmost Quttinirpaaq National Park on Ellesmere Island.

“The Arctic is a place of incredible beauty. It is not a snow globe of permanent glaciers, permafrost and northern communities,” he said. “It is a heritage that needs to be fundamentally protected in the interests of global citizens, not just Canadians.”

Canada and Korea -- a member and observer, respectively, of the Arctic Council, a multilateral forum that addresses issues faced by the Arctic governments and Indigenous communities -- can strengthen their research collaboration on the state of the region and ways to preserve it, according to the professor.

England suggested holding annual or biannual forums through which various themes related to the Arctic are raised and discussed among scientists, policymakers and diplomats.

“The sky is the limit,” he said in terms of collaborative opportunities, mentioning biology, geology, botany, zoology, oceanographic and marine sciences, among other areas of investigation.

Korea’s icebreaker Araon conducted a 70-day international exploration mission in the Arctic Ocean, reaching the North Pole on July 21 as part of an international team
organized to probe into the causes of global warming and its impact on the Arctic ecosystem. Canadian and Korean scientists, along with those from the US, China and Germany, collaborated on the mission from Aug. 27-Sept. 16.

“As a new frontier, there is another gold rush, a stampede to use up the Arctic’s resources and carelessly develop them without considering all negative consequences,” England emphasized, saying, “We run the risk of killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.”

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Pointing to the Ellesmere Ice Shelf that has shrunk to a mere 300 square kilometers from 10,000 in the past, the academic said human civilization has “already lost the luxury of pretending we can just keep growing and growing and growing without any cost.”

England underlined the growing scientific consensus that the United Nations-led Paris climate agreement is not enough to adequately stall global warming. Ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference in Bonn, Germany from Nov. 6-17, experts have warned that tens of millions of people will be dislocated from their homes by changing climate and sea rise in the coming decade. The number of climate refugees will dwarf those who have fled the Middle East and North Africa, forewarned senior US military and security experts, bringing insurmountable challenges to Europe.

Scientists estimate that 275 million people worldwide live in low-lying coastal areas vulnerable to flooding at a rise of 3 degrees Celsius in global warming by 2100, the latest projection to lay bare the inadequacy of the Paris accord, designed to limit temperature rise within 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels.

The agreement could be “much more ambitious and stringent,” England said. “Given our human creativity, there is not much we can’t do, including slowing and even reversing carbon emission through renewable energy, carbon sequestration and geoengineering if we put our minds to it.”

Despite Donald Trump administration’s withdrawal from the Paris accord, there’s still a “wellspring of goodness and dedication” toward mitigating climate change and protecting our environment in the US, he said. “But we can only achieve our goals if we pull on the same rope together. We have to challenge those climate change deniers in a progressive and rational way, not by name-calling or vilifying.”

For Canadian Inuit activist Caitlyn Baikie, climate change has been an unstoppable tide upturning her people’s indigenous lifestyles for millennia.

“While the European colonization affected our ways of living, climate change has added extra pressure on how we transmit our oral history,” she said in an interview, noting Inuit are an oral people whose knowledge has been bequeathed intergenerationally through livelihood-related activities such as hunting.

Global warming has changed seasonal patterns, making it difficult to pass down hunting skills and practical knowledge to younger generations, as the weather and outdoor conditions have become unpredictable and dangerous, explained the Canada 150 ambassador and member of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society.

Baikie was born and raised in Nain in the autonomous Inuit area of Nunatsiavut in Newfoundland and Labrador. She currently lives in Gatineau, Quebec.
The Inuit people, who have lived across the Arctic regions of Greenland, Canada and Alaska for thousands of years, used to travel seasonally to harvest different animals, such as seals, whales, walrus, caribou, polar bears, muskoxen, birds and fish, she said. But since the modern colonization of the latter half of the 20th century, they have begun to settle in small communities and participate in modern economies and ways of life.

The majority of Inuit people live in 53 communities spread across Inuit Nunangat, their homeland encompassing over one-third of Canada’s landmass and half of its coastline in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunatsiavut in Labrador, Nunavik in Quebec and Nunavut.

“My father was the first person to be born in a hospital, the first generation to grow up with technology, be expected to go to school and not learn our traditional language Inuktitut,” Baikie said, adding the modernization wave came only six decades ago.

Due to the rapid transition, she revealed, many people who had no proper education or experience in the modern economy struggled and fell behind, often taking their own lives or taking drugs. Nowadays, however, through the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the national representational organization protecting and advancing Inuit rights and interests in Canada, Inuit communities are strengthening their positions and coping with various issues, she added.

The Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada also plays key roles in how the government develops programs and policies regarding indigenous governance.

Drawing attention to the untradeable value of their heritage, Baikie highlighted the movie “Angry Inuk,” a 2016 Canadian feature-length documentary film written and directed by Alethea Arnaquq-Baril that defends the Inuit seal hunt.

The film portrays sealing, which has been the Inuits’ lifeblood since time immemorial, as vital to their modus vivendi and argues against the European Union’s ban on seal products as well as the disapproval of Greenpeace, the International Fund for Animal Welfare and other nongovernmental organizations.

“Angry Inuk” entered Canada’s Top 10 list at the Toronto International Film Festival on Dec. 7 last year and won numerous film accolades.

“The information that’s pumped out into the world is heavily funded and influenced by people who don’t know anything about seal hunting,” Baikie said, adding anti-sealing activists stir popular imaginations with pictures of crying seal pups and the gory killing of seals.

“Our commercial seal hunt accounts for over half of our sealing. It’s not only for our livelihood. It’s a very humane and sustainable hunt, as we use every part of the animal, including the skin that gets traded worldwide,” she said.

“People think we still live in igloos with no television or internet, when in fact we are watching closely issues that directly impact our lives, like the climate change and anti-seal hunt campaign.”

Source: The Korea Herald

URL: http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171113000916