The Creation of an Arctic Law Thematic Network  
(University of the Arctic)  

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Arctic legal issues are currently a “hot topic”. The region is undergoing a vast transformation due to double pressures of economic globalisation and climate change, posing many challenges to the existing legal systems functioning in the Arctic. There are plenty of topical issues to deal with, ranging from outer continental shelf law in the Arctic Ocean, legal questions related to the opening Arctic seas, rights of Arctic indigenous peoples, biodiversity law or oil and gas related regulations in the region, and so on.

It has become increasingly clear that we need legal expertise in the Arctic. The Arctic has certainly served as a laboratory for natural sciences and, to some extent social sciences (such as anthropology), but there has been an obvious lack of legal expertise in the region. This has also had clear impacts on actual policy-making in the Arctic, most dramatically shown by the misunderstandings related to the “race to resources” story-line spread by the media after the Russians had planted their flag underneath the North Pole over Lomonosov ridge. The idea marketed by the media – and to some extent researchers as well – is that the reason behind the Arctic Ocean coastal states continental shelf “claims” over the sea bed was climate change and its effect in opening a new Ocean with vast hydrocarbon resources. The first international polar law symposium organized from 7–10 September 2008 in Akureyri, Iceland was able to convey the message of legal experts that there was no scramble for resources, but instead an orderly development based on the law of the sea and the UN law of the sea convention (LOS Convention). It was this conference and others that have by now clarified that indeed the continental shelf developments took place – at least so far – fully in observance of the law of the sea and LOS Convention in the Arctic.

Hence, there is an increasing need for Arctic legal expertise and for a Thematic Network dedicated for this purpose. When professor Bankes from the
University of Calgary led the Arctic Council sponsored Arctic human development report’s legal chapter during the years 2002–2004, we still suffered from many legal experts working on the Arctic issues. This has changed in the past few years, and is also manifested with the emergence of specialist journals in this field, such as the Yearbook of Polar Law (published by Brill, at http://www.brill.nl/pola) and the Arctic Review of Law and Politics (Gylden- dal, at http://akademiskweb.com/index.asp?id=129002). This has also been noted in the University of the Arctic (circumpolar virtual university, with huge number of universities and other higher level educational institutions as members, see at http://www.uarctic.org/Frontpage.aspx?m=3), which has for some time nurtured this idea under its Thematic Network Program (see at http://www.uarctic.org/SingleArticle.aspx?m=56&amid=68).

There is clearly a great enthusiasm among lawyers to create such a Thematic Network. When the undersigned invited scholars and other legal professionals in the Arctic countries and beyond to join the Network, all wanted to join and now we have already over 55 members in the Network (even before it has been formally established). With the help of the University of the Arctic and University of Lapland (international relations), the undersigned was able to convene a small planning meeting in Äkäslompolo Finland from 14–18 December 2010. Before this meeting, we asked guidance from all the Network members as to what they would like to do with the Thematic Network, which helped us in coming up with an initial plan on what types of activities the Network could do. With the help of four foreign researchers giving their insights in the Akäslompolo meeting, we, at the Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law (Arctic Centre/University of Lapland), were able to come up with an initial plan of activities. The institutional design was also discussed and we will commence the Arctic Law Thematic Network with the undersigned as the chair and researchers Tanja Joona and Leena Heinämäki as vice-chairs.

**Activities**

During the meeting in Äkäslompolo there was a general consensus that the most interesting and realistic way to start would be to try to seek funding for a big conference to meet each other, and give presentations on various Arctic legal topics. The appropriate place for this is the next polar law symposium, which will take place from 8–10 September in Nuuk, Greenland, and will have a special session on the Network activities. Another interesting idea that was taken up in the Äkäslompolo meeting is to initiate sub-groups that deal with specific issue-areas. The way we envisaged these to operate is that these would be fairly independent entities under the general umbrella