
**SVALBARD LIFE** is a beautiful coffee-table book that anyone can crack open and can use to become enthralled in various aspects of “Life on Svalbard.” This is true for those of us who have spent many years conducting scientific research in this archipelago and also for the armchair traveler who dreams of a trip to the European Arctic. The book is a deeply researched and realistic journey into every thinkable niche of life that is associated with Svalbard. The book’s 11 chapters describe an incredibly diverse range of topics that provide the reader with a broad and detailed account of the physical, social, and cultural environment as well as a historical survey of exploration, well-respected artists, and scientific research and discovery in this region.

Author Paul Wassmann and photographer/book designer Rudi Caeyers are associated with the Department of Biosciences, Fisheries and Economy at the University of Norway in Tromsø. Wassmann and Caeyers are originally from Central Europe—Germany and Belgium, respectively. It is clear that they are both smitten by the “arctic bug,” and they have returned many times to the archipelago. It is not uncommon for those of us who begin research or artwork on Svalbard to return time and time again to the enticing and almost addictive arctic wilderness.

In his introduction, Wassmann explained his motivation for writing the book. “Based upon the desire to transfer knowledge in alternative ways to the traditional pathways of science communication, that are obscure to the layperson, the idea arose to merge text with photographs, art, and graphic historical images. "...the book does not follow a straight line, but wanders, and jumps from one central aspect to another in the periphery. It constantly looks for diversity, ideas, and enjoyment. It considers life! The book bears a resemblance to a collage or a mosaic and is thus not meant to be read from the beginning to end, but rather over time, every now and then, and in a ‘vauling’ and ‘random’ manner...[the skills of] Rudi Caeyers, gave me new insight into how to unify text with imagery in order to obtain a product that both represents a high standard and achieves the goal of addressing the whole reader, not just their intellect.” Essays often conclude with provocative questions asking what can be done to preserve the integrity of the Arctic, and the earth, for future generations. The thread that runs consistently through the book’s intriguing, diverse, and sometimes provocative essays is that of concern about degradation and, therefore, protection of our valuable natural resources and uniquely wonderful and austere wilderness on Svalbard and in the arctic region as a whole. The author stresses the dire impact of global climate change being accentuated in arctic regions and the need to address issues for decreasing man’s destruction of his own habitat. The essays often portray the author’s poetic writing expressing his ideas of man’s spiritual dependence on pristine arctic environs.

**SVALBARD LIFE** is a large format book, 30 cm x 60 cm. The large format also does justice to the artwork and paintings of the many famous international and historical artists that have been attracted to the aesthetic arctic environment.

**SVALBARD LIFE** begins with a foreword by Albert II of Monaco stating that Monaco has forged a unique bond with the arctic regions for more than 100 years. The bond dates back to his great-great-grandfather, Prince Albert I. He had a love for the white expanses and an extraordinary lust for discovery. Prince Albert I was a pioneer in oceanography and paleontology and led several expeditions to the Far North in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His devotion to research on Svalbard and economic support initiated the institution that has evolved into the Norwegian Polar Institute. Prince Albert I’s descendent, Albert II, also led an expedition to Svalbard in 2006, “where [he] was able to assess the tragic retreat of the glaciers since the photos taken by [his] ancestor.” The Principality of Monaco feels a sense of kinship with, and has a deep concern for, the fragility of the arctic environment, its landscape, and fauna, and the impact of global warming. This kinship inspired another commitment by Monaco to support polar research. Albert II expresses the importance of Paul Wassmann’s work in writing **SVALBARD LIFE**. “...raising the awareness of each one of us, regardless of our geographical situation or origins, that we will be able to change the behavior patterns that are currently threatening Spitsbergen (Svalbard) by intensifying global warming.” Svalbard is the name of the archipelago and the name most commonly used in Europe. The two largest islands are named Spitsbergen and Nordaustlandet.

Scientist, arm-chair travelers, artists, and the general public will all enjoy this book and find their favorite chapter(s) in **SVALBARD LIFE**. The text draws the reader into the local flavor of the high arctic islands. A good example of the broad range of topics that the author researched thoroughly while writing the essays is chapter 3, Svalbard History: The Early Days. Essays include: Willem Barentsz discovers Svalbard, The whaling frenzy, Intermesso with Russian hunters, Early research expeditions, Dawn of modern scientific investigations, Significance of the La Rescherche expedition, Early Norwegians attempts to exploit the Arctic Ocean, and Renaissance sounds from the ice.

“The whaling frenzy” essay was exciting to read. Dutch expeditions in the 15th century, searching for the Northeast Passage, created a sudden focus on the economic significance of Svalbard. Whaling of the abundant slow-swimming bowhead whale, which provided colossal revenue, created rivalry among England, Denmark-Norway, the Netherlands, and Spain. The explorer Barentsz and his men reported extensively on the abundant whale populations of Svalbard. At this time, European lamps were fueled by whale oil, and the market for the oil was immense, which drove the whalers to intense activity. Human casualties due to the whaling activity were huge: capsized rowboats, scurvy, and other incidents. Everyday life for these men consisted of using primitive harpoons to catch whales and boiling their blubber to extract the valuable oil. Whaling continued close to the coast and in the west Spitsbergen fjords until the mid-17th century. Decrease in whale numbers forced whaling to more open waters. Whales had to be killed at sea where they were found and blubber boiled on-board. At this time, there were about 300 ships whaling in the European sector of the Arctic Ocean. As whale populations decreased, the base on Svalbard lost its significance. All that remains today on Svalbard are a few huts and...
a major burial ground of what used to be a town with 200 whalers, living in 16 houses, with an annual catch of 750–1250 whales. True to the historical artwork included in the book, on the facing page of this essay is a large oil painting by Jacob Storck titled “Walvisvangst” (Whaling). The scene is of the ocean teeming with Dutch sail- and rowboats, icebergs, whales, and whalers fighting off polar bears, as walruses look on from a turbulent sea.

Chapter 7 (People: then and now) includes historical essays on explorers: Prince Albert I, Salomon Andree, and Roald Amundsen; scientists: Joseph Gaimard, Fridtjof Nansen, Gunnar Isachsen, and Adolf Hoel; hunters: Ivan Sarostin and Hilmar Nøis; women: Leonie d’Aunet, Hanna Resvoll-Holmsen, and Wanny Woldstad; and miners. All of these historical essays are enhanced with artistic portraits of the individuals. A Norwegian botanist and nature conservation activist, Hanna Resvoll-Holmsen (1873–1943), was often set ashore on Svalbard alone to carry out fieldwork, with a gun, a camera, a plant press, adequate provisions, and her tent. She was one of the first students to earn an MS degree in botany in Norway. She studied plants and environmental conditions that limited growth. She published the first edition of the now popular Svalbard Flora in 1927.

The past is brought into the present in essays about issues of the recent decline in Arctic Ocean sea-ice cover and thickness and possible plans of using the Northeast Passage regularly in the summer to connect with the Far East. During the past two years the new sea route has been tested with cargo vessels and oil tankers.

The author’s expertise as a marine biologist comes to life in the nicely illustrated introduction essays to plankton, benthos, and marine mammals.

Svalbard Life was published with funding from and in cooperation with the University of Norway in Tromsø and the research network ARCTOS. The book meets the goals and the description that the author intended, “…a collage of impressionistic, mosaic-like fragments that stimulate visions of life in Svalbard and leave the entire vista to the creativity and imagination of the reader and spectator...The ultimate aim of this book is the support of multidisciplinary understanding ... a precondition to reach sustainability and resilience management, the most essential goal for a promising future.”

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