



“If Oceans Could Speak”

Episode 2 Transcript

Dr Gosia Smieszek: Every person matters and every action counts

[00:00:00] **Gosia Smieszek:** Gender is really central to so many discussions that we have in the, in the region. And about the future of, of the Arctic. But few years ago, it was still really not the case that it would be brought up in all those fora that often. And I'm very happy to say that this is something that we see now much change.

[00:00:20] **Jen:** Hello, and welcome to another episode of If Oceans Could Speak, the podcast that listens to the oceans through the personal stories of those who share their life with the sea around them. As always Stefan and I are going to be chatting to the people behind these unique stories in the hope that our conversations, not only intrigue, but inspire you to reflect upon your own individual connection to the ocean.

[00:00:43] **Stefan:** In this episode, we will be focusing on perspectives from the Arctic Ocean and we are delighted to have Gosia Smieszek with us today. Dr. Smieszek is working at the university of Tromso, Norway's Arctic University, and is an acclaimed political scientist. Gosia is passionate about creating positive change, advancing environmental protection, and addressing climate change and challenges ahead of the Arctic.

Her work on the Arctic and environmental governance, science policy interface, and gender equality, has culminated in co-funding and co-leading a non-profit called Women of the Arctic, welcome Gosia.

[00:01:18] **Gosia Smieszek:** Thank you very much, Jen and Stefan. I am delighted to be here. Thank you for having me.

[00:01:22] **Jen:** No, thank you. And I guess we have so many things we could talk about, but maybe we can start at the very beginning.





So you grew up in Poland and I was wondering how did you first become interested in the Arctic and what was it about the Arctic that sort of drew you to have a career in that, in that area.

[00:01:40] **Gosia Smieszek:** That's an excellent question that I think actually quite an easy one for me to answer. So, my interest in the Arctic began actually more than 10 years ago when I completed my master's program at the college of Europe.

And in my studies, I have been always interested in environmental climate and energy questions. And it was at the time when I was considering, when I began considering doing a PhD, that a professor whom I met to talk to, talk about. He actually already back then had experience of working in Northern Russia.

And when I mentioned to him that I'm interested in questions around the climate and environment and energy, for him actually the idea of focusing on the Arctic was very natural. And I just remember very vividly until today, that when he asked me or when he mentioned the Arctic in our conversation and whether I would perhaps considering focusing on, on the Arctic, in my research, I just remembered that instantly I thought, yes.

That's really what I want to do. And at the time I can say, I knew literally nothing about the Arctic, literally zero. But this is really how, how my interest in the, in the Arctic began. And, and from that moment on, it was, it was basically always, my focus and centre of what I've been doing.

[00:03:01] **Stefan:** By now you've lived in different parts of the European Arctic. Can you tell our listeners a little bit what it is like.

[00:03:10] **Gosia Smieszek:** I guess many people imagine it's, it's cold. Which is true in many parts of the Arctic, but actually two places where I have lived thus far. It is actually quite, they differed quite a bit, even though they are both located in European Arctic.

The first place where I lived was Rovaniemi, in Finland, which is right at the Arctic Circle. And this is also where Santa Claus lives. So I suppose many people may have heard of Rovaniemi, about Rovaniemi in this context, but the point is





that Rovaniemi is landlocked. And so in fact it gets quite dry in winter and also very, very cold.

So it was during that time there, where we would have winters of minus 25, minus 30 degrees celsius. The place where I live now, Tromso in northern Norway, is completely different because Tromso, is located right on the coast, winter's here because of Gulf stream, they do not get so cold. Of course, it gets windy.

The darker period is longer than it used to be in, than it is in Rovaniemi. But those are kind of two experiences that I have from directly living here. Of course, I think it is important to know. That those are two places in European Arctic, which are still very well connected with the rest of Nordic countries and the rest of Europe.

And of course, this is not the case for many other parts of the Arctic. It is very, very different from the situation from how communities live in northern Canada and Alaska. But yes, that's, that's been my experience of living here.

[00:04:45] **Jen:** What is it that you work in, what are you, what is your interests and what sparked these interests?

[00:04:50] **Gosia Smieszek:** So, I'm a political scientist by background. My masters has been in international relations and I did my PhD in political science on, on the Arctic Council. The primary inter-governmental forum for the Arctic. But I think speaking about my research interests more broadly, it has been always international environmental governance and in particular its effectiveness.

So, understanding how our today's institutions work and what we can do to try to make them more effective, in addressing some of the major challenges we all face. And I think in the, in this case, this institutional dimension of environmental change is something that I'm particularly interested in because in my view, of course, it is so important that we understand the environment, the ecosystems, how climate works around our planet.

But I always keep on going back to thinking that in terms of protecting our planet, protecting the environment, those are actions of us humans, that we can change. Those are institutions that we need to design accordingly, to be able to respond to those challenges. It is not the nature that needs to change, but as, as humans.





And I think for me that has been always my driver, in seeking to understand this institutional dimension of climate or environmental governance, but in in connection to this, I have been also for a long time interested now and researching also questions of science policy interface as it is sometimes called.

So it's basically a question of on the one hand transfer of scientific knowledge into decision-making processes. But today we actually do understand much better that this is not only a transfer, it is not one way street, but rather a question of how we can design this proper interaction between knowledge holders, scientists, decision makers.

So we could be making more, evidence-based more, more effective decisions for, for all of us and, and for the environment. So I guess those are, those are my two primary fields and I, and I have always find them very connected. So I have been moving back and forth between those two.

[00:07:09] **Stefan:** Staying with the topic of institutions for a moment you're Co-chair of the Polar Oceans Cluster of a task force on oceans governance. Why is the Arctic ocean so important in the context of ocean governance, overall?

[00:07:23] **Gosia Smieszek:** That's an excellent question, and I think for any political science, everyone would agree with that. But but the main point is that the main reason why it is important to have the Arctic Ocean or in fact, both polar oceans included in conversations about global ocean governance, is because they are so closely connected with the rest of the global system.

So even though so many people might think about the Arctic Ocean as being located so far north, and in fact, maybe separate from, from the rest of the world. Of course as the ocean is, is the part of the global ocean system, but also all the actions that we take in other parts of the world, they have tremendous effect on the Arctic.

That's why addressing questions related to the Arctic Ocean's in those larger conversations. Is so important so that we understand how those bigger systems, the consequences they have for the Arctic and for the Arctic Oceans', but also how, what happens in the Arctic Ocean's, and there is so much change happening now, how this in turn influences this, this bigger discussions and processes.





[00:08:34] **Jen:**

Yeah that's amazing to hear you say that. And we've heard before from other guests, this idea that the Arctic is something that connects us all and it's really like the heartbeat of, of the ocean. So I think the fact that you also say that as a really nice synergy between, between the episodes. So that's great.

And I guess I'm wondering how, how difficult is it to govern an ocean like the Arctic that's surrounded by different countries? And I guess a lot of these countries might have their own interests and own priorities.

[00:09:01] **Gosia Smieszek:** Of course, that's that's a very good question. Fortunately, in, in the Arctic, and I think, whereas some people might focus more on conflict or potential conflict between Arctic states, the truth is that in the Arctic, we actually do have an enjoy long history of collaboration, especially when it comes to issues pertaining to the Arctic Ocean. So of course, in the past we had the period of cold war where the Arctic Ocean was literally and figuratively frozen for any state interactions, but since then so much has changed.

And today the Arctic council and collaborations between eight Arctic states, including also indigenous peoples of the Arctic is very well advanced. And those countries really seek dialogue and maintain in permanent contact, when it comes to matters pertaining to the Arctic Ocean. Of course, the fact that the Arctic Ocean is melting at such unprecedented pace and we're seeing more and more activities opening up in this vast area means that, today, we're looking not only in the interest of Arctic states, but also many non-Arctic states and other actors interested in the region. Once more, fortunately, until now we have had structures among them, the Arctic council that, that have been able to accommodate a lot of this interest and bring more participants into the, into discussions.

So, I would say that until now, we are really in a good position when it comes to platforms that we have for, for dialogue and collaboration. And if I say until now, it is not. I think that something will change in this respect. But if there is one thing it's mostly the pace of changes that we see, that is not only very fast, but constantly accelerating.

So sometimes if, if there is a question that I have it more relates to, whether we will be able to catch up with the pace of this changes and really put in place, right





measures, actions, and responses, so we can really help the climate and ecosystems and people living around the Arctic.

[00:11:18] **Stefan:** With this rapid change, there off course considerable concerns for the future of the Arctic Ocean, especially with regard to the loss of sea ice because of climate change. As the Arctic Ocean now opens up, in a way, there's of course, scope for greater interest and exploitation also of the region, from many different countries, those from beyond the Arctic. How important do you think will, issues like collaboration across countries, but also collaborations between different sciences, disciplines, policymakers, and of course, including the indigenous communities. How important would all of that be for the future of the Arctic Ocean?

[00:11:59] **Gosia Smieszek:** Thank you, Stefan for the question. I think it is really excellent and I've think that, to begin with the pace and scale of changes that we see in the Arctic exceeds capacities of any single actor of any scientific field discipline to provide answers and to be able to respond to those changes effectively.

It there's simply no single country, no one has it all, especially even in terms of, if we want to think in terms of resources, conducting scientific research in the Arctic and specifically in the Arctic Ocean is extremely expensive endeavour, so, and it requires a lot of logistics, a lot of preparation, that often times countries do not have in place, which calls for even stronger collaboration.

As, as previously mentioned, Arctic has a really great history of scientific cooperation across borders, including with indigenous peoples. We are really in a very good position to address that. Of course, in order to properly understand what is happening in the Arctic, we need experts, we need knowledge holders, we need people really from all walks of lives and all disciplines to properly understand what is happening in the region, but also how can we react to this in a matter that is not only efficient and effective, but also equitable and do, just, to, to people who live here. So I really think, as the saying goes that it takes a village, I think this is really what we see in the, in the Arctic. It really takes us all to address those challenges.





[00:13:44] **Jen:** Yeah, I would agree, and I imagine that a lot of your international scale diplomacy work must be fraught with difficulty and negotiations and implementing change can be maybe slow and frustrating at times.

What keeps you motivated? Do you have, do you have some sort of hobby or activity that helps you reconnect with the ocean that's surrounding where you live, to sort of help you, remind you, that you're trying to, to help and protect it.

[00:14:14] **Gosia Smieszek:** Thank you, that's, that's such an excellent question, and I, and I was also glad to hear when you mentioned how sometimes slow and occasionally frustrating the process of participating or only observing international negotiations can be. I think this important to, remember here, or this is something that I always try to remind myself about the also the small steps in the right directions that we see, to kind of cherish even the small victories to remember that there is hope that we are doing some things. And even though most, if I were actions, perhaps do not really match the scale of what we need to be acting at, I think that that's, that's one thing that I always try to note for myself, but otherwise outside of work, for me, always reconnecting with nature has been incredibly important. So, that has been always also my driver to live in the Arctic, just to have a chance to live in such amazing places where contact with nature is just given, contact with the environment.

Here, where I live now in Tromso, of course being by the sea is even a bigger part of this, but being out in nature, hiking, going to, to the mountains or earlier in Finland, spending time in forests has been always my way to wind down and recharge. That has been my way to do it, but also to remind myself sometimes of what this work is all about, why we are doing this, Why sometimes we're getting engaged in all those activities, and some of them take long, long hours. Of course, for, I think everyone on this call and listening to this, my well-recognise that, but that's also my way to remind myself of why, why we are doing that.

[00:16:18] **Stefan:** This we, that definition who's working in the Arctic, that's also evolving, you co-founded Women of the Arctic together with Tahnee Prior. Women of the Arctic is a non-profit, which helps raise awareness, support, and maintain a focus on women's and gender related issues in the Arctic, and the inspiration for this came from the lack of female presence at conferences and meetings surrounding Arctic issues and lack of spaces for women to talk about issues experienced by women of the Arctic. And that's indeed still characteristic of a lot of Arctic related events, that they're still very much male dominated. Why





are these forms so exclusive, especially when there are so many women experts actually working in the Arctic.

[00:17:01] **Gosia Smieszek:** I think the answer to this questions goes really long way into, into the past, into really the history of, so to say Arctic exploration by, by Europeans, primarily, and the fact that it was mostly men who were exploring the Arctic for many different reasons.

So in this sense, we have always had the accounts of the Arctic of what the Arctic is or how people live here, provided from men's perspective. And I think this is one thing that has continued unquestioned for a very, very long time. And it was still a reflected in the practice of natural sciences, in the, in the region for a very long time, where men were largely in majority. Or course, going once more living into field work, doing field work for really extended periods of time for a long time, this has been more a domain of men than, than women.

As you mentioned, today we see this landscape, this situation vastly change. So of course there are so many women experts working in the, in the Arctic science, but also in Arctic communities, in so many positions. So of course this situation today is very, very different, and yet with Tahnee, when we began discussing the situation around the Arctic conferences, and of course, over the last decade, we have seen such a boom of Arctic events. I mean, it was not really the situation 10 years ago, but today it is pretty much every single week that you can attend Arctic event or conference. But as we were looking at that, we realized that women's voices, women's issues are often times not present in those discussions. And our assumptions was not that, that it is something being done on purpose, it's just that it is some, some form of gender blindness, just not considering that issues that we're discussing, whether those are economic developments in the region, whether we are speaking about extractive industries shipping, or how to address climate change, that in fact, those things play out very differently for women, men, but also those beyond gender binary.

Because of course, our NGO is called Women of the Arctic, but our website is genderisnotplanB.com. And this in fact capture, the best, the idea that in fact, gender is really central to so many discussions that we have in the, in the region and about the future of, of the Arctic. But few years ago, it was still really not the case that it would be brought up in all those fora that, that often. And I'm very happy to say that this is something that we see now much change, and hopefully that's the direction that we keep on going.





[00:19:48] **Jen:** I love that phrase, gender is not plan B and that this, that these ideas of gender blindness and things like this, I think are really important and really coming to the forefront of everyone's interest now.

And so, contrary to plan B, Women of the Arctic have launched Plan A, which is a platform to showcase the personal and professional stories of women who live work and engage with the Arctic and Northern seas. And we would love it if you could share maybe one or two of these stories with us that you've showcased so far on the Plan A platform.

[00:20:21] **Gosia Smieszek:** This is actually a hard question, because I think to decide just on picking one or two, it's really a challenging question, because stories of women who so generously agreed to share their stories with us for Plan A, they're all so amazing, and they come from so many different parts of the Arctic, but also they have such diverse experiences. But since we are speaking about the Arctic ocean, I think this connection to water and to, to the seas, perhaps is worth highlighting here. And among women whom we interviewed and who came to our launch event in Helsinki in 2018, was for instance, Kjersti Busch, who is Director and General Manager of this SALT company from Lofoten.

And SALT has been really interesting example of a company that has been established by, by women in Lofoten, so in Northern part of Norway. And their idea was really of how to bring ocean related knowledge to action. And it is really a tremendous success story. So from a very small company today, they have many more employees, they have several offices, they regularly work in different projects, larger decision-making processes, but also they have become really important part of discussions around Lofoten and how sustainable development in that part of Norway can look like. So, it was really interesting to, to hear there from Kjersti sharing her perspectives, her experience on, on the history of SALT, but also for instance, their consideration of questions such as, work-life balance, how to ensure the satisfaction and wellbeing for all their employees. The challenges of working in a place that is so remote as, as Lofoten. So it was really very, very interesting to, to hear from her about that. On a completely different note, I would love to mention here Susan Eaton, who is a Nat Geo Explorer from, from Canada and among her many, many activities, one of the things that Susan has, has been running are, all female diving and snorkeling expeditions in the Arctic. So she has been running those expeditions for quite a while now, partly, partly as a mentorship leadership program for, for women, but especially in the Canadian context, she was also bringing diverse into Northern communities and





seeking to bring enough gear and equipment to also involve indigenous communities, in this. So in a sense to, to show Inuit also world underwater, which perhaps might be less familiar to some of them, especially the to younger ones, and this is really once more, an incredible history of drive of passion and really the experience that Susan shared, I think it resonated very deeply with many.

I could also say here that for, for those interested on our website, we have showed the videos with, with all the women who we interviewed. So for those interested more in learning more about Kjersti, Susan or, or others, there was always a chance to do that.

[00:23:36] **Jen:** Amazing. I need to get in touch with Susan that sounds such a wonderful thing to do.

Yes. And definitely the website is genderisnotplanb.com and there are many, many stories like that on there. Definitely check out. So, since this non-for-profit Women of the Arctic project was created have you, have you noticed any differences in gender inclusivity at these events? and how has it changed you as, as a woman of the Arctic,

[00:24:02] **Gosia Smieszek:** AS earlier mentioned, I'm really delighted to say that over the last few years, we have seen really big change when it comes to discussions about gender issues, gender equality, women's issues, when it comes to the Arctic, both in decision-making, but also in the context of Arctic and polar science and research. So, first of all I really would like to credit here, next to Women of the Arctic, there are many other organisations and NGOs that are really active in, in this sphere. And they have also got established relatively recently over the last few years. Of course I could mention here Women in Polar Science, but also there are many gender research groups and also those who like for instance, Minorities in Polar Research or Polar Pride, who focus also on ethnic racial minorities, but also those beyond gender binary as, as previously mentioned. And it is really so good to see so much interest and support that they are receiving. Just the fact that today we can have this conversation so openly and it doesn't surprise people anymore that much. I think it, it shows quite a lot of progress that, that we have seen.

Since my focus is so much on the Arctic Council and circumpolar collaboration, I think that it's worth mentioning here that Iceland, as one of its main areas of





focus had gender equality for its two year term as the Chair of the Arctic Council. So, just now they completed this, this term and as a part of the work, they decided to conduct the study and publish the report, an Arctic report on gender equality, where with Tahnee, we have been a part of of the editorial team. We've been also the lead authors of the chapter on gender and environment. But the main thing is that the fact that the whole report and the work of Iceland and the Arctic Council has put so much light on questions of gender equality, it's really one of the most important things to mention here.

I think when it comes to Arctic science or Arctic Ocean, it is also for instance now how, how it has changed perhaps our small association, because I think it is important to mention here how, how small we are and hopefully growing bigger in the future. But just now we are partner in the major EU funded project on Arctic Observing System, where it will be actually our task to work with gender, gender equality issues in the, in the project. So, that being included in this application and now having a chance to participate and being part of this huge project is definitely also a huge step forward. And I think here, there will be surely occasions to talk more about this in the future, but I think once more, to acknowledge how much focus and attention has been paid to matters of inclusivity and equality from the start in this project and in more and more EU funded, Arctic research is, is a really good sign of things moving forward.

[00:27:12] **Stefan:** Thanks so much, for a lot of people it's already something of a lost world, the Arctic, seeing that climate change has such a big impact and many people will never have the opportunity to visit the Arctic or the Arctic Ocean. At the beginning, we started our conversation by looking at your own way towards the Arctic, your own first steps towards the Arctic. Why is it important for people from all over the world around the globe to take an interest in what's happening in the Arctic Ocean, especially the political side of things?

[00:27:44] **Gosia Smieszek:** I think I could begin by saying first that actually myself, I have never been to the Arctic Ocean and the truth is that not so many people have been there. Of course, unless we're thinking of Northern seas. So, so those along the coastlines of Russia, Nordic countries, Canada, or Alaska, the Arctic Ocean until today remains really a very difficult place to access, and perhaps fortunately, so. But of course, it does not mean that it does not deserve our interest or care, and I think Stefan, partly in your question, you already answered this, and of course, the main reason for this is climate change that is changing the region, changing the Arctic Ocean, in the pace that even 20 years





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ago, scientists themselves could not really understand, and foresee that it will be happening so fast.

So, not only we are losing every year more of sea ice, but literally what happens with this is that in front of our eyes, we are losing the entire ecosystem. So in the sense, this part of the world, for everything that we know now, will never again look the same for future generations. So much of the ice is already lost, that this entirely unique landscape, is just going to vanish, and partly because of our actions. And sometimes I think for many people, the Arctic might feel so distance, but perhaps one other way to imagine is, imagine this is, how could we think that in 30 to 50 years, we could simply lose the entire Amazon jungle?

Losing Arctic sea ice, opening Arctic Ocean, is really the change of the same scale and it's just happening right in front of our eyes. But even more so, even if one could think that this is happening so far from where, where people live, that maybe this is only something that matters to the people who live closer to the Arctic Ocean, this of course is not true.

We know so well the role that the Arctic and the Arctic Ocean is playing in global climate. So in fact, what is happening, the actions that we are all taking, in some ways as individuals in our everyday actions, I think it really contributes to this that, we are, in some sense, we are turning off the thermostat for the, for the warming up world.

This is what, what we are doing when, when the Arctic is changing so fast and where we are losing the sea ice. So I think it's people, whether we do care about our own wellbeing or whether we care for others, the Arctic is really key to, to both those aspects, and I think it's justifies interest and care of everyone.

[00:30:41] **Jen:** Yeah, thank you for that. Really nice reflection. Gosia you once said and I'm going to read a quote from you, you said "don't be afraid to carve out your own path, the world today is changing so fast that we should believe in ourselves to create opportunities, trust and the value of what you're able to bring to the table".

And that's an incredibly rousing thing to say, it's almost like a call to action you might think, but how exactly do you think listeners who want to make a change





for the Arctic Ocean or elsewhere, how can they bring their ideas and their passions to life? What advice would you

[00:31:14] **Gosia Smieszek:** First I'm just thinking that it is really nice to hear that phrase that I said, well, quite a few years ago. And still feel today that I really stand behind this. That I would say exactly the same thing in the first place. So that's, so that's a nice part, but I think this question of what people can do for what listeners might want to do to get engaged with the Arctic Ocean or, or Arctic issues, here I would like to recall questions that it is actually another female trailblazer, Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson from the US when she talks about action for climate change and how to engage with it, she encourages people to ask themselves few, few questions. And the first one is to consider "what are you good at?". Because we all have so different and unique skills, capacities, things that we can bring. And I think so often we tend to think that maybe the best way to engage and to act is kind of, is to walk the path that others have already done just to join those things. And of course, for many people it might work, but I think tapping into our own individual skills that we have can be so much more powerful.

And here Ayana also talks about reflecting on "what brings you joy?". And I think for, and I'm sharing this because for me, this question was personally so important, it actually stopped me for a while, too reflect, what brings me joy in this process, because I think without this it's, it is really difficult, it might be really difficult to sustain our interests. I mean, sometimes being in this processes and they're all so long term, I mean, to make the change that we want to see, this is no short-term game. This is really something that requires a lot of, lot of action, effort, and sometimes patience. So I think this factor of finding something that gives people, listeners joy, is, is extremely important here. And I think from this, from just looking at what needs to be done, what we are good at and what brings you joy, I think the intersection of those can be a good guidance, so that has been at least how it has worked for me.

[00:33:40] **Stefan:** That's indeed a strong message there. If you could share one thought or message about the Arctic Ocean itself that you'd like others to know, that you'd like to share with our listeners, what would that idea or thought about the Arctic Ocean be?

[00:33:56] **Gosia Smieszek:** I think if I had one thing to share about the Arctic Ocean, would be that even though many people might think that this smallest Northern, most of all, our oceans, is at this place that they will never get to see or





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even get close to it. The truth is in today's world we are all interconnected and what we all do, what everyone does, it matters to the Arctic.

And I think as much as it might feel overwhelming and intimidating to some, so thinking in a way, who am I and what can I do in face of those paramount challenges of Arctic sea ice melting. I believe it can be also very empowering to know that your actions have impact on even the most remote, beautiful places on our planet. And that with this with our everyday actions, we can help to save them and we can, we can contribute to, to the protection of places, so amazing as the Arctic ocean.

[00:35:02] **Jen:** Thank you so much Gosia, for sharing your journey with us. Thank you for this really nice reflection on all the work that you're doing and it's been wonderful speaking to you.

Thank you.

[00:35:12] **Gosia Smieszek:** Thank you so much. It's been my pleasure.

[00:35:15] **Jen:** That's all for today. Do make sure you check out the website genderisnotplanb.com for lots more information about the fabulous Plan A initiative. In the blurb below, we'll put a link to this website and to the Iceland report on gender equality in the Arctic that Gosia mentioned in today's episode.

If you liked this episode, please leave us a rating on whichever listening platform you're using. And if you would like to share your own ocean stories, connect with us using the hashtag, #IfOceansCouldSpeak. This podcast was brought to you by members of the EU4Ocean initiative and was made by the, If Oceans Could Speak Production team, led by Penny Clarke, co-organized by Arne Riedel and Anna Saito and presented by Stefan Kirchner and me, Jen freer. From all of us, thank you for listening.

