



## “If Oceans Could Speak”

### Episode 7 Transcript

#### Kimberly Aiken: Be the change

[00:00:00] **Kimberly:** Representation matters. It's really important to see others in spaces that mimic you or that look like you, that represent your same goals and values, and what you can bring to, to the subject matter.

[00:00:17] **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.

[00:00:39] **Stefan:** In this episode, we will be focusing on perspectives from the Arctic ocean, and we're delighted to have Kimberly Aiken with us today. Kimberly currently works as a Research and Policy Associate for the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, and previously worked in the Arctic as a Policy intern with the Alfred Wegener Institute and on the [00:01:00] Polar and Climate Programme at GRID Arendal. Kimberly is interested in the social and human dimensions of Arctic environmental change and expanding diversity and inclusion efforts in all areas of polar research and policy.

To make this episode extra special, Kimberly brings her perspectives of both poles. We're so excited to welcome you Kimberly and thank you for talking to us.

[00:01:23] **Kimberly:** Thank you so much for having me, it's a pleasure.

[00:01:26] **Jen:** So Kimberly let's, let's start at the beginning I guess, you grew up in the countryside of South Carolina in the USA and in my mind that's extremely different to the world of the high Arctic.

So my first question I guess is, how did you get first introduced to the Arctic world?





[00:01:43] **Kimberly:** Thank you for that question, it's a great question. Yeah, growing up in the countryside, it's like a hundred times removed from both the Arctic and the Antarctic, and I didn't become, more closely involved in polar affairs until [00:02:00] 2016 actually.

When I lived in New York city and, it was actually through documentaries, particularly Mission Blue and Blue Planet. And I learned so much, through these two documentaries, they were so profound and had such a profound effect on me, that in that moment I decided to have a career change, and the idea was simply birthed in my bedroom, in my apartment in Brooklyn.

[00:02:26] **Jen:** Did you ever think it would become a reality that you would, you would go on to that?

[00:02:32] **Kimberly:** Uh, you know, that's a great question also, I guess, I never really thought that I would be doing the things that I'm doing right now, you know, in my career, and I haven't even been doing this that long compared to many others, who've been doing this for a really long time. Everything just sorta catapulted and I just sort of went off into orbit and just, you know, took the, the bull by the horns, if you will, and just want it to get involved in, [00:03:00] in everything that was polar related from policy to governance, to social issues, environmental justice issues, the human dimension, you know, environmental degradation and just everything really. And so I just really sort of immersed myself, did a lot of reading on my own, both personally and professionally, through my graduate studies.

Yeah, I just wanted to, shape it into something that really fits me and my personality.

[00:03:29] **Stefan:** Before you start to work in the Arctic, you've been working as a legal secretary for 7 years you have an MA in International Environmental Policy. How did this inspire you in your journey to governance in the Polar Regions? And how did you establish a career there?

[00:03:47] **Kimberly:** Well, you know, I was looking for something that was self-gratifying, and that was, again, the thing that sort of drove me down this path, even before I knew it, I found the work, [00:04:00] the issues, the affairs, the people, everything to just be gratifying on a level that I can't even really explain.





And then, because I came a little bit from a legal background and working with a lot of, some of the best and brightest minds in New York city in law, from environmental law, to trademark and patent and everything in between. Often times I would see that, I guess the clients would, could easily find a way some loopholes, some gap in the law, that could help them as opposed to, I guess, the environment sort of being the client.

And then I thought to myself, well, well, what if we flip this on its head and decide that, you know, the environment should, should be the client. And I dunno, I guess in hindsight, maybe I should have did environmental law or something like that. So, so that really sort of helped get me more involved in the issues, subjects of, of polar governance and the interconnected web of international institutions and mechanisms that help govern both these places [00:05:00] and manage the region.

[00:05:01] **Jen:** Thanks for that, that sounds fascinating. And so your first time in the Arctic, where was it, how did it come about? And can you try and paint us a picture of, of what it was like to actually set foot there?

[00:05:15] **Kimberly:** Yeah, certainly. So I think my first time in the Arctic would be the Canadian sub-Arctic. I was in the Yukon doing some, field research for an Arctic field's summer school that I participated in back in 2019 on Kluane Lake, in the first nations area of, of the area. And it was a wonderful experience, I learned so much, I was one of maybe only two policy students that were participating in the Arctic field summer school.

And it was a very, rewarding, experience of, of looking at, you know, different parts of the cryosphere, particularly at the Kaskawulsh glacier, that's in the area. But I guess one of my other main [00:06:00] highlights was when I was above the Arctic circle last year in 2020 in January, when I was in Tromso in the, in the parts of the Swedish and Finnish Arctic when I visited the three nations border.

And I believe it was maybe negative 25 degrees Fahrenheit there, and, it was all icy white conditions and everything, as far as the eye could see was white and it was very windy. And I think if I had to echo the words of Ms. Barbara, Hillary, one of my, idols, I would probably say the same thing that she said when she made it to the North Pole as, "I just felt light both in my, in my heart and body and spirit, and it was just a beautiful experience, and it just touched depths and parts of me that I, I never thought could be reached. And, I was just so grateful and so





fortunate to have those experiences and opportunities, and I hope to have many more".

[00:06:59] **Stefan:** This [00:07:00] idea to be touched by the Arctic, by this special experience, I think that's something that a lot of people come to the Arctic for the first time experience. How has your relationship with the Arctic grown over the years?

[00:07:15] **Kimberly:** I think that's a great question, one that I'm particularly interested in answering because , my relationship with the Arctic, it grows with the Arctic and the Antarctic, it grows deeper and deeper, you know every time, particularly when I'm walking through the landscape and interacting with the natural elements and with the communities particularly in the Arctic, there's always so much to learn and so much to absorb and take in, to appreciate really.

For me, it provides exceptional perspective to one's position in the world, and has really helped foster for me, a deeper feeling of human connectedness, both with others that are different, but similar to me, who share a [00:08:00] like-mindedness, that's woven together through our shared experiences and storytelling. But also to my connectedness with the earth and with our natural landscape and the environment and everything that it provides to us all. So I think that there has certainly been evolutions, it certainly teaches me patience, stillness, there is a lot of quietness in the background, but so much is still happening at the same time.

So it has, taught me to really appreciate so much more the things that I have, the things that I don't have, the things that we all have and the things that we all share. And just remembering that, everything is a system and we're all a part of this system. And, it's just really a beautiful thing. So I'm really glad about the way in which our relationship continues to grow so beautifully, around each.

[00:08:59] **Jen:** It sounds [00:09:00] amazing, it sounds as if you've worked so hard to reach this point in your career, and you just take it all in as much as you can, and, and I think that's something to really value. I was wondering quickly to follow on from that, what is it about the Arctic and Antarctic that brings about such this visceral feeling and you can't really seem to get that from anywhere else. What can you pinpoint exactly what it is about the Polar Regions that brings about these feelings?





[00:09:28] **Kimberly:** For me, I know this probably would be a silly answer, but it really, for me is the cold.

I enjoy the cold very much. I don't fancy warm weather, particularly at all. I have a very low threshold for heat, but it's something about just, I mean, when you see it either through a documentary or if you see it with the naked eye, it's almost like your breath is just taken away. You can't even really almost find words to put on [00:10:00] something so beautiful, so natural and so organic. Something that is both forgiving and unforgiving, can be both beautiful and treacherous all at the same time. I think, this, this understanding of, of how all of this, happens and takes place in both the Arctic and the Antarctic is just so fascinating and I'm particularly fascinated with different earth systems, particularly our planetary systems and then our earth systems and how all of these things work and function together.

And so it is, it is these things that sort of, I guess, drives me to, to this longingness of, of these regions and, and their beauty and, their diversity, most people think about them, it's just very all white landscapes and it's boring. And maybe there is nothing [00:11:00] to see because everything is white, but there's everything to see. And that's the beauty in all of that. And I think that when you have on the right lens, you can see all of that. And it shows you so much more that you can't even really see or find anywhere else in the world. It is, it is remarkably beautiful and I've not yet been to the Antarctic, but I hope someday, and I look very much forward to that.

[00:11:27] **Jen:** I would love that just to hear your perspective of that Antarctic as well. I think you, you paint it so, so beautifully. So, you wrote passionately about Ms. Hillary, who you mentioned before, and she was the first African-American person to reach both poles, and just as Ms. Hillary was an inspiration for you, you are aspiring to become a role model for young girls and people from all sorts of diverse backgrounds, to get an interest into the polar regions. What do you think are the challenges for diversity and inclusion in STEM, science, technology, engineering, math subjects. [00:12:00] And what would you say to those who are listening and would like to be engaged more in polar regions and polar oceans?

[00:12:08] **Kimberly:** Yes, thank you for that question. It's a very loaded question, you know, certainly not I guess a very new question. There are many challenges that face the STEM fields and the polar community is certainly not





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immune from these challenges, particularly seeing people of color, more in particular black and indigenous people in polar science, polar research policy, it is difficult.

I myself have, most recently, well, I shouldn't say most recently, but last year faced a bit of adversity, in the Arctic community. And that, and that was very unfortunate for me. It's actually very painful, and in parts sort of naive, to think that it wouldn't happen, or I guess particularly that it wouldn't come so very [00:13:00] soon, but I think, this idea of inclusiveness, particularly to the Arctic, there's over some 4 million people that live in the Arctic and many that belong to different indigenous communities and, and they have so much to share on the subject matter. You know, they are in essence the experts in a lot of ways to this region, this is their home. And, and I think that we, as a society and as the polar community, we have to stop making decisions about people and places without, (1) consulting these people and having conversations with these people and including them in the science and the research and papers and so on, but using their indigenous traditional knowledge systems and indigenous science as a complimentary tool piece to Western science to come up with better solutions of how [00:14:00] we can co-exist in these places, in the face of climate change. And I guess what I would say to young girls and boys, to people of color that are interested in the polar regions, I know it looks dire and grim. You know, representation matters. It's really important too, to see others in spaces that mimic you or that look like you, that represent your same goals and values and what you can bring to, to the subject matter.

And so I, I hope that to many others who are interested in getting involved, that they see me as a person that they can look to, and envision themselves through of being able to, to work in any space or feel that they, that their heart desires. And I didn't see a reflection of that, I still don't see a reflection of that in the polar community, there's probably maybe 1 to 5% of people of [00:15:00] color working in this field. But I hope that we can change this and, and open doors and minds and take a different approach and stop leaving talent on the table or in the community, if you will, and sort of, bringing it all in, so that we can have better discussions and ask the right questions about how we can move forward. Both as a society of being better individuals, around diversity, equity and inclusion, but also how we can be better for the environment that serves us all. So, so that's, that's my hope and my goal, I have a lot of work to do there, but, I'm hopeful that, some pages are turning and I think many in the polar community, both in the Arctic and Antarctic are really seeing this and, and making, and taking steps to,







to diversify the area and include other perspectives and voices, because they're very important.

[00:15:59] **Stefan:** Thank you for [00:16:00] this important reflection also on polar communities. In your project governance in the Arctic you've addressed fundamental questions regarding ownership in the Arctic of the Arctic governance, but also the role of indigenous peoples, the existing institutions and agreements in Arctic cooperation. And now you're personally interested in incorporating, as you just mentioned, indigenous traditional knowledge into science and policy.

Why is this important also for the future of the Arctic Ocean?

[00:16:33] **Kimberly:** I first like to say, I often think it best that my indigenous brothers and sisters, answer these types of questions, because, well, (1) because they're indigenous and then (2) they're, more experts and scholars in this field, but, I'd like to echo the words of, an indigenous colleague and friend of mine, we often have these [00:17:00] different conversations about things and indigenous traditional knowledge is important, not just to the science, the policy interface, but to the Arctic Ocean and any issues in particular, in the, in the Arctic, because it's a knowledge system that understands the ecosystem in a different way than Western science does.

And it also provides a more robust, and better understanding of what's going on in the environment, to make informed decisions, and choices, whether it's about climate adaptation or development. I mean, it's also ethically right, to include in the science policy interface, because by doing so, indigenous traditional knowledge systems, better understand, I guess, people in a [00:18:00] place and the interconnectedness of those things.

And so I think that's very important. Again, I think I may have said, just previously that, indigenous traditional knowledge or indigenous science should be seen as a complimentary tool to science, to Western science, to help us better understand things. And there is really no right or wrong here. And I think that's really, what is the beauty of this? And, the reality is, is that, time is both our friend and not our friend. It is not always on our side. And so I think there is a great deal to be learned from indigenous traditional knowledge science and their relationship, not only just to nature, but to, kinship with others, with the community, human [00:19:00]





beings and non-human beings. And, and that provides a very sort of different perspective to how we understand ourselves, both with nature and, and being able to, to make decisions better about, nature and the environment.

[00:19:18] **Stefan:** Thank you. That's an important reminder that different forms of knowledge are truly important, especially in the Arctic. You have work now focuses on the Southern Ocean and you look at both the Arctic Ocean and the Southern Ocean. Do you see challenges which are similar for both the Oceans or do you see the differences being more pronounced?

[00:19:44] **Kimberly:** Actually I see maybe the challenges are, are most similar and I think they're most pronounced, particularly, climate change is the main challenge, right? You know, changes in sea ice conditions, sea ice [00:20:00] thickness, loss of ice mass to the Antarctic ice sheet, shipping, changes in ocean water temperature and salinity.

All of these things, you know, really stem from climate change. This is, this is the main driver of, of challenges to both regions. I mean, certainly, they are, the actors are a bit different than the geo-political interests are different yet similar, but you know, both regions, they have a lot in common and it's very important to remember, that the Arctic Ocean, the Southern Ocean, Antarctica, the Arctic, they are the air conditions of the earth, really. When we think about it, there are the things that help protect us and cool us down when things are heating up too much. And right now both of those regions are heating up too much.

And certainly what happens in the Arctic and the [00:21:00] Antarctic and the Arctic Ocean, the Southern Ocean does not stay there. It finds its way throughout the rest of the planet. And, and so, looking at this in, in my work with the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition ASOC. We're looking at, these challenges and, and trying to, to work with, global leaders from an NGO perspective, and our policy perspective to figure out ways and to help mitigate climate change and, and other challenges facing the region, like, shipping or, fishing and transshipment and so on, and those sorts of things, particularly in the Antarctic. But also, designating Marine Protected Areas to combat and fight between global crisis of climate change and biodiversity







[00:21:49] **Jen:** Great. I like that idea of thinking about the Arctic and Antarctic as the air conditioning for the world. I think that's a really good way of putting it actually, brings it home really nicely.[00:22:00]

[00:22:03] **Stefan:** Being inspired and maybe also being an inspiration for others, is there an achievement that you're particularly proud of in your career?

[00:22:13] **Kimberly:** You know, honestly, I guess I never I'm, I'm one that I never really like to, I guess, think of, or reduce my career, to one single achievement that I'm most proud of.

For me, it's more like a series of achievements or moments like this one, for example, and many others combined that make me the most proud, you know, when I've had the luxury of being able to sit with Sami indigenous communities, in Norway or you know, sitting with Inuit or Yupik indigenous communities in Alaska or at different polar conferences or meetings that I've [00:23:00] attended, or, you know, even simply, working with my boss and others at ASOC, you know, it, or particularly even working at AWI, you know, which was something that was definitely on my bucket list of things to do.

It is the combination of all of these things, together, that make me the most proud and all the things that I've been able to do and see, and the people that I've been able to connect with and meet, these experiences and opportunities are the things that I'm truly most proud of and being able to do them in such a short period of time.

I've only graduated with my masters, I believe that was last year in 2020, but I sort of took a headstart approach to my career in the polar community at the very beginning of my graduate career, [00:24:00] which started in 2018. So I'm just really, really grateful and thankful for all of these moments and opportunities and experiences and everyone who has been with me both as a mentor and friend along the way, who have helped guide my thoughts on, on how I can be of help and, and get involved more deeply in the polar, community and the issues.

[00:24:33] **Stefan:** And if you could share one thought, one idea about the Arctic Ocean and the Southern Ocean that you would like to give to our listeners, to share with our listeners, what would that be?





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[00:24:46] **Kimberly:** Oh yeah, certainly. I love this question. Well, for starters, I want everyone to remember that everyone on the planet benefits from the Arctic and Southern Ocean, no matter how far [00:25:00] removed you are. It's also important to remember the relationship of the Arctic and Southern Ocean to global health, through regulating the Earth's climate and the nutrients that the Arctic and Southern Ocean pump throughout the Ocean.

Right now, the EU is proposing two large-scale Marine Protected Areas in the Southern Ocean, in the East Antarctic and the Weddell Sea. Both of which right now are blocked by Russia and China. In order to overcome this opposition, we need global leaders to act now in 2021. And I hope that many others will join in on the ASOC campaign of calling on CCAMLR to secure Antarctica, and to work with the other global leaders and [00:26:00] institutions in the Arctic to secure the Arctic Ocean as well for future generations and for the beauty of, of both of these regions.

And, and so that is my hope, and that is what I would like to leave both with you all and with the rest of the world, to remember the importance of both the Arctic and Southern Ocean and the benefits that they provide to us all.

[00:26:27] **Jen:** So working in constant knowledge of all of these threats that you've just listed, it can be a really daunting thing, and I guess it weighs quite a lot on your mind, quite often. And is there one thing or a few things that still give you hope for these environments and how do you, how do you deal with these sort of extrinsic, I don't know the word, extrinsic, um...

[00:26:47] **Kimberly:** Threats?

[00:26:48] **Jen:** Threats. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:26:51] **Kimberly:** That's, that's a great question also.

It, it can be daunting, really. And sometimes [00:27:00] you think, oh gosh, maybe there's no hope for us, but, I'm optimistic and I would say that I am cautiously hopeful. But the thing that gives me hope for these environments for, I guess, the planet as a whole is the people that I work with every single day, myself included. I think it is that, that fire, that passion, that dedication that burns inside of each and every one of us doing this work, that reminds me of our mission to continue







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to do this work. And everyday when I work with these people and I'm in different meetings and calls and having [00:28:00] discussions and conversations, and strategising and thinking about next steps, always in what we can do either better or differently creatively. These things sort of inspire me, the people around me, the people that I work with, they inspire me and I see our vision, and I do believe that continuing this work that we can make the change that we need.

Also, I will say, to the younger generation, to people, indigenous youth and to youth all over from all different backgrounds who take a stand on climate action on climate change on environmental and social justice and how all of these things affect their communities or the planet in general, that [00:29:00] also gives me hope. That persons are not just particularly sitting around and saying that they will leave it up to others to, to sort of sort this out. The best news is that it's never really almost too late to get involved and you're not too young or too old to get involved, right? So, so that is the beauty and those things give me hope.

And I think as long as, each and every one of us have this burning desire, to, to be the change we wish to see in the world, gives me hope that we can move the needle a bit more. Of course public policy is rather slow, but maybe with some, adopting of adaptive governance strategies and maybe some other creative solutions that we can move this needle a little bit faster.

And so I would say for sure that I am cautiously [00:30:00] optimistic and hopeful for, for our future and for, for both polar regions, the Arctic and Southern Ocean.

[00:30:08] **Jen:** I think that's the perfect message to share and I think that's also a really good place for us to finish for today. I just want to say thank you for sharing your journey with us. And I really genuinely feel that you have this, this passion inside of you that's going to take you to lots of amazing places. So thank you for sharing, just a small snippet of that in our podcast for today.

[00:30:30] **Kimberly:** Thank you so very much again for the invitation.

[00:30:34] **Jen:** That's all for today. Do check out Kimberly's excellent article on her idol, Ms. Hillary, called 'Trailblazer in the Arctic: a tribute to the first African-American to reach both poles', you can find it on the Arctic Institute's website and we've put a link to it in this episodes blurb. If you like this episode, please leave us a rating on whichever listening platform you're using. And if you would like to



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share your own Ocean stories, connect with us using the hashtag [00:31:00] #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-organised by Arne Reidel and Anna Saito and presented by Stefan Kirchner and me, Jen freer. From all of us, thank you for listening.



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