



Hot debate, icy economy in '09

Climate change campaigns, struggles of coal mining and tourism top year's local news

We're officially a bunch of fun-loving people, according to the government, a good thing since overall it was a pretty crummy year.

The economy tanked, taking coal mining and tourism with it. A lot of noise was made about climate change being most severe here, but not much actually doing anything about it resulted. Almost nothing seemed to go right for the Russians.

In some ways, what didn't happen was the best news in Svalbard for 2009. The Norwegian government didn't make startling changes in the area's long-term strategic plan, ensuring mining will remain the dominant industry. A major shipwreck spilled oil in one of the world's most pristine wildlife areas, but didn't wreak environmental havoc. Norway's biggest earthquake ever struck off the coast, but doesn't even get further mention here because there was no damage.

There were feel-good moments as well, including a record-length helicopter rescue of a man at the northern tip of Greenland. Also some bizarre ones, such as environmentalists

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Polar bear fossil called oldest ever

Jawbone from 2004 UNIS trip may be 130,000 years old

A jawbone discovered during a university excursion to an island west of Spitsbergen in 2004 is the oldest remains of a polar bear ever found, according to two authors of a newly published scientific analysis.

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A Greenpeace protester who helped halt mining at Svea for a day wasn't the only problem in 2009 for Store Norske, which announced large cutbacks and layoffs due to a collapse in world coal prices. Photo provided by Greenpeace.

Hit story of the decade: 'Doomsday' seed vault

Other events affected local residents more, but from a global perspective it wasn't even close.

The Svalbard Global Seed Vault dominated headlines about the area during a decade also featuring Norway's two biggest earthquakes, the most ferocious sea monster in history and a prominent role in a couple of battles for the future of the planet.

"Global warming" was anointed the top phrase of the decade by The Global Language Monitor, based on the frequency of use by the media. So it can't be too shocking that "doomsday seed vault" – even if the term makes supporters cringe – is a runaway favorite for Svalbard using the same criteria.

"In a time when apocalyptic thinking is in vogue with dire threats of global warming, asteroid attacks, nuclear holocausts, desertification, coastal flooding, climate change, financial collapse and terrorism, a 'Doomsday Vault' near the North Pole seems appropriate," wrote Dana Prom Smith of the

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Goodbye to the Awful Aughts



Longyearbyen youths watch fireworks at Skjæringa as midnight arrives for the New Year of 2010. Groups gathered at locations around town to launch several thousand fireworks sold during the final few days of the decade. About 30 people gathered at the hilltop Skjæringa memorial, traditionally a popular launching and viewing site.

Who's to blame and how to express your wrath

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Submitting material

Letters, columns, photos and other material are welcome, but we can't offer pay for published items since nobody here is getting paid at the moment. Submissions in electronic form (text, Word documents, JPEGs, etc.) are highly preferred, although typing and/or scanning of items will be considered on a per-case basis. We reserve the right to edit submissions for length, clarity, accuracy, libel and other reasons, but we will also make every reasonable effort to contact the author about any changes prior to publication.

Someplace to be on Christmas Eve



Guests load up on traditional Norwegian holiday foods during a Christmas Eve celebration at the Radisson Polar SAS Hotel. The gathering, the second by the hotel on a night when virtually nothing else is open in Longyearbyen, was started in 2008 as a way of giving single workers and others a place for merriment. Nearly 200 people, mostly locals, filled the hotel for activities including songs and a visit from Santa. Some of the 30 tourists staying at the hotel also signed up for a frigid midnight expedition to see the northern lights as part of a series of holiday events.

Local news in brief

Temperatures stay above normal in December

Longyearbyen's average temperature in December was nearly 8 degrees Celsius above normal, continuing one of the warmest years and decades ever but failing to set records as happened in November.

December's average airport temperature was minus 5.5 degrees, compared to the historical average of minus 13.4 degrees. The warmest reading was 4.8 degrees on Dec. 10 and the coldest minus 17.6 degrees on Dec. 27. The record December temperature average for Longyearbyen was minus 2.7 degrees in 1984.

Total precipitation was 28 mm, compared to a normal of 16 mm.

A combination of factors is believed to be the cause of the high temperatures, led primarily by less ice and higher water temperatures, according to the Norwegian Meteorological Institute. Arctic ice melting in 2008 and 2009

were respectively the second- and third-greatest decreases on record, and some scientists predict a total melting of Arctic ice in as little as five years."

'Stunned' scientists find shark eats polar bear

The polar bear's reputation as the top Arctic predator around the North Pole may be in jeopardy.

Scientists studying how far sharks travel to hunt seals were stunned to find part of a jaw of a young polar bear in the stomach of a Greenland shark off the Svalbard coast.

"We've never heard of this before," Kit Kovacs, of the Norwegian Polar Institute, told Reuters. "We don't know how it got there. We can't say whether or not the shark took a swimming young bear or ate a carcass. We don't know how active these sharks are as predators."

Polar bear jawbone offers rare opportunity

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The 23-centimeter, well-preserved jawbone is between 110,000 and 130,000 years old, the article states. Students and staff with The University Centre In Svalbard discovered the specimen during a trip to Poolepynten on the island of Prins Karls Forland, with news of the find made public in 2007.

Polar bear fossils are a rare find because they live and die on the pack ice, making their evolutionary history largely unknown, according to a UNIS summary of the report. The jawbone at Poolepynten was apparently deposited

during a period of relatively high seas after a regional deglaciation. Burial in fine-grained marine sediments and permafrost conditions kept the jawbone preserved.

The fossil was believed to be from a female when first announced publicly, but is apparently a full-grown male similar in size to today's bears, according to the study by Ólafur Ingólfsson, a UNIS and University of Iceland professor, and Øystein Wiig, a University of Oslo professor.

Further analysis about the potential of evolutionary study of the fossil is underway.



U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's visit to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in September is among several trips by world leaders drawing worldwide attention to the world's largest genebank. The facility, opened in February of 2008, has already resulted in more articles about Svalbard than any other event during the past decade.

Seed vault puts Svalbard in the limelight

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Arizona Daily Sun in a profile of the vault appearing two days after the end of the decade many are calling the Awful Aughts.

A Google news analysis of articles from the past decade containing the word "Svalbard" shows the most – by far – appeared the month the vault opened. The surrounding months, the one-year anniversary and a visit there by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon represent the vast majority of the other top months.

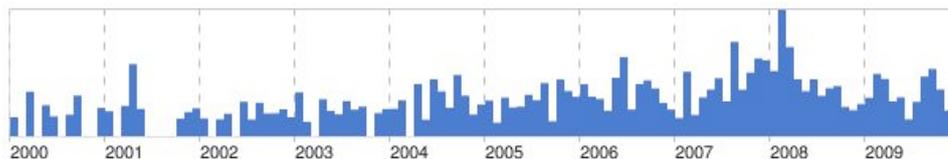
Advocates saw the seed vault offering insurance and hope to a world facing starvation as climate change threatens native crops worldwide. Opponents saw a conspiracy by government and agribusiness to seize control of farming from local growers and reap big bucks with genetically modified species. Filmmakers and novelists saw great material for stories, often with an apocalyptic twist.

The Nordic Gene Bank stored seeds in a abandoned Svalbard coal mine beginning in 1984. The seed vault, housed about 130 meters inside a mountain near Longyearbyen's airport, opened in February of 2008 after years of debate and study. It's the world's largest genebank with a capacity of 2.25 billion seeds, which researchers say may be preserved for hundreds or thousands of years due to the Arctic cold.

For those living here, however, the vault didn't play much of a role during a decade of major booms and busts.

Norwegians reaped mostly escalating riches in coal and tourism, Russians saw their fortunes literally go up in smoke. Researchers worldwide flocked in to study the hot issue of the decade.

There's more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.



A Google News chart showing the number of global articles with the word "Svalbard" during the past decade peaks during the period of the seed vault's construction and opening.

HEADLINES STOLEN FROM SVALBARDPOSTEN VERDENS NORDLIGSTE AVIS

Indoor fireworks light up otherwise calm New Year

Firefighters responded to a building on Road 222 after fireworks set off indoors triggered the alarm. No injuries or serious damage were reported, and it is not known who is responsible. No other significant incidents were reported by officials during New Year's Eve celebrations around Longyearbyen.

Fireworks sell quickly for New Year's Eve launches

Thousands of fireworks were sold at Svalbardbutikken within the first hours of being available, according to Store Manager Karin Mella. The sale began at 4 p.m. Dec. 29 and as of the next morning "we have already sold a tremendous amount." People have gathered at Skjæringa during previous years for a communal launch, but one is not scheduled this year. But Mella said she expects a lot of activity around Longyearbyen, including people gathering for group launches.

Telephone, internet services restored in Ny-Ålesund

Telephone, internet and television services were restored to Ny-Ålesund on Dec. 27 after a nine-day outage due to the failure of a relay station at Kongsvegpasset. A power unit failed and the backup battery quickly depleted Dec. 18 at the station on a mountain between Ny-Ålesund and Longyearbyen, and poor weather prevented a helicopter from bringing in a repair crew. Kjell Arild Bakke, an operations engineer for Telenor Svalbard, said the weather finally improved sufficiently at about 10 p.m. Dec. 27 and workers arrived within an hour to make repairs. Bakke said considerable work remains, including thawing equipment. Kings Bays Director Roger Jakobsen said the restoration brought joy to the 40 people at Ny-Ålesund since "it has been uncomfortable to be isolated in this way, not least because this happened at a time when the need for contact with family and friends is extra large."

Weather forecast for Longyearbyen

Wednesday

Heavy snow and wind. SSE winds at 25 km/h. High -10C (-21C wind chill), low -11C (-24C wind chill).

Thursday

Snow ending and colder. N winds at 19 km/h. High -10C (-13C wind chill), low -23C (-32C wind chill).

Friday

Cold, evening snow. ENE winds at 14 km/h. High -17C (-21C wind chill), low -17C (-28C wind chill).

Saturday

Windy with periods of snow. WSW winds at 40 km/h. High -16C (-23C wind chill), low -19C (-32C wind chill).

Extended forecast: Sunday, cold with snow, -19C (-23C), -21C (-38C); Monday, partly cloudy and not as cold, -10C (-21C), -11C (-21C); Tuesday, snow, -5C (-13C), -11C (-19C); Wednesday, cloudy and flurries, -8C (-18C), -12C (-18C).

Data provided by AccuWeather.com



Bishop Per Oskar Kjolaas' message about the church and Arctic warming during a Nov. 21 bell-ringing ceremony was part of a three-day gathering of science and religious leaders before the international climate summit in Copenhagen. The ceremony at Skjæringa, the first in a nationwide procession of ringings, was also featured in a month-long television series focusing on Svalbard.

'White paper,' Russian mishaps big in '09

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blockading the Svea mine for a day in Svalbard's first political protest and, despite eluding criminal charges, paying the price when customs agents found too much undeclared beer on their ship.

The following are the top 10 stories of 2009, based on impact and the extent of coverage nationally and globally. As with any such list the results are somewhat subjective and, in this case, further prone to errant judgements by a first-year publication.

1) Store Norske announces major cutbacks: Mining isn't going to be around forever, but a 60 percent drop in coal prices from record levels in 2007 helped trigger a preview of the decline to come in Svalbard's main industry. Store Norske, saying it needed to cut expenses 20 percent, announced a 10 percent cut in its 400-member workforce for 2009 and plans to further reduce total workers to 250 by 2015. Attrition was expected to absorb the initial cutbacks, but incentives such as early retirement and educational support will likely be offered as incentives for workers to depart this year. A decline in miners, who account for about 30 percent of the man hours worked in Svalbard, will also affect businesses taking in their money and government allocations for key services.

2) "White paper" recommends continuing coal mining: Bad as things were for Store Norske, they could have been unthinkable worse if the Norwegian government shifted course on its long-term strategy for Svalbard. Instead, the April report calls for continued mining within strict environmental limits and using existing infrastructure as much as possible. It also cites the growth of tourism, education and research as keys to the ensuring long-term economic and social development, and expresses concern about the threats global warming and resource development pose to the environment.

3) U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visits: The controversial U.N. leader went to a lot of places trying to raise awareness about global warming before the Copenhagen climate summit in December, but none matching the imagery and diplomatic calamity surrounding his trip to Svalbard at the beginning of September. Speculation was rampant Ban would cancel the long-mentioned trip after a lengthy memo by a top Norwegian diplomat detailing his "spineless and charmless" lack of leadership leaked a couple of weeks beforehand. A planned helicopter flight to the Polar Ice Rim had to abort due to excessive ice buildup on the blades, causing him to spend the night aboard a ship that went to the rim instead. He made it back in time to see his native South Korea's deposit at the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, then told the world press the impact of warming he'd seen was "very alarming." For much of the world the lasting image was a "crying glacier," encountered during the ice rim voyage, depicting a face in the ice melting in a river of tears.

4) Tourism plummets after a strong 2008: Pricy holidays to the Arctic became an obvious miss for plenty affected by the global economy downturn. Overnight stays were down by double-digit percentages much of the year, and Spitsbergen Travel closed Spitsbergen Hotel and Spitsbergen Guesthouse a month early as Norwegians apparently chose to vacation on the mainland instead. Many local tourism operators said they aren't panicking, arguing a turnaround is possible as early as this year and noting 2008 was strong due to unique circumstances such as the 100-year anniversary of the conquest of the North Pole.

5) Cargo ship *Petrosavodsk* crashes off Bjørnøya. The policy implications, bills and eyesore resulting from the grounding of this Russian ship will linger long.
There's more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.

What's up

Jan 6

First day of school after Christmas holiday.

Jan. 10

8 p.m.: Movie: "Quiet Chaos," Italian drama, ages 11 and up. Huset.

Jan. 17

6 p.m.: Movie: "A Christmas Carol," U.S. drama/fantasy, ages 11 and up. Huset.

8 p.m.: Movie "Looking for Eric," Belgian/British/French comedy, ages 11 and up. Huset.

Jan 19

8 p.m.: Svalbard seminar, topic to be announced. Møysalen research center. First in a series involving the Norwegian Polar Institute.

Jan 21

8 p.m.: Svalbard seminar, topic to be announced. Møysalen research center.

Jan. 24

8 p.m.: Movie: "Faustas Perler," Peruvian drama, all ages. Huset.

Jan 26

10 a.m.: Meeting of the Administrative Committee. Næringsbygget 1, Tundra room.

8 p.m.: Svalbard seminar, topic to be announced. Møysalen research center.

Jan 26

8 p.m.: Svalbard seminar, topic to be announced. Møysalen research center.

Jan. 27

Registration deadline for UKM cultural festival, open to youths 11 and older. Information at www.ukm.no.

Jan 30

4 p.m.: UKM festival, featuring music and other cultural performances throughout Norway. Longyearbyen show is at Huset.

Jan. 31

8 p.m.: Movie: "Alvin and the Gang 2" U.S. family film, all ages. Huset.

What's online

[Icepeople.net](http://www.icepeople.net) provides daily updates of news about Svalbard and the world's polar regions, plus extras for articles from the print edition. Among the latest news:

- *Polar bears extinct within a century?*
- *Northern Lights at low ebb this winter*
- *Pyramiden: City of frozen dreams*
- *Shackleton's lost-lost scotch not so fine*