

# 'A very great loss': Greenland sled dog champion fears for his culture as ice melts

Emma Burrows, Evgeniy Maloletka and Kwiyeon Ha

Growing up in a village in northern Greenland, Jørgen Kristensen's closest friends were his stepfather's sled dogs. Most of his classmates were dark-haired Inuit; he was different. When he was bullied at school for his fair hair - an inheritance from the mainland Danish father he never knew - the dogs came to him.

He first went out to fish on the ice with them alone when he was nine years old. They nurtured the beginning of a life-long love affair and Kristensen's career as a five-time Greenlandic dog sled champion.

"I was just a small child. But many years later, I started thinking about why I love dogs so much," says Kristensen, 62.

The dogs were a great support. They lifted me up when I was sad. Jørgen Kristensen Greenlandic dog sled champion

"The dogs were a great support," he says. "They lifted me up when I was sad."

For more than a thousand years, dogs have pulled sleds across the Arctic for Inuit seal hunters and fishermen. But this winter, in the town of Ilulissat, around 300km north of the Arctic Circle, that's not possible.

Instead of gliding over snow and ice, Kristensen's sled bounces over earth and rock. Gesturing to the

hills, he says it's the first time he can remember when there has been no snow - or ice in the bay - in January.

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## Rising temperatures in Greenland contribute to global sea level rise

The rising temperatures in Ilulissat are causing the permafrost to melt, buildings to sink and pipes to crack but they also have consequences that ripple across the rest of the world.

The nearby Sermeq Kujalleq glacier is one of the fastest-moving and most active on the planet, sending more icebergs into the sea than any other glacier outside Antarctica, according to the United Nations cultural organisation UNESCO.

As the climate has warmed, the glacier has retreated and carved off chunks of ice faster than ever before - significantly contributing to **sea levels that are rising** from Europe to the Pacific Islands, according to NASA.

The melting ice could reveal **untapped deposits of critical minerals**. Many Greenlanders believe that's why US President Donald Trump turned their island

into a geopolitical hotspot with his demands to own it and previous suggestions that the **US could take it by force**.

## 'We have large parts of our culture that we're losing'

In the 1980s, winter temperatures in Ilulissat regularly hovered around -25 Celsius in winter, Kristensen says.

But nowadays, he says, there are many days when the temperature is above freezing - sometimes it can be as warm as 10 Celsius.

Kristensen says he now has to collect snow for the dogs to drink during a journey because there isn't any along the route.

Although Greenlanders have always adapted - and could make dog sleds with wheels in future - the loss of the ice is affecting them deeply, says Kristensen, who now runs his own company showing tourists his Arctic homeland.

"If we lose the dog sledding, we have large parts of our culture that we're losing. That scares me," he says, pressing his lips together and becoming tearful.

## The sea ice is disappearing

In winter, hunters should be able to take their dogs far out on the sea ice, Kristensen says. The ice sheets act like **"big bridges"**, connecting Greenlanders to hunting grounds but also to other Inuit communities

across the Arctic in Canada, the United States and Russia.

"When the sea ice used to come, we felt completely open along the entire coast and we could decide where to go," Kristensen says.

This January, there was no ice at all.

Driving a dog sled on ice is like being "completely without boundaries - like on the world's longest and widest highway," he says. Not having that is "a very great loss".

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Several years ago, Greenland's government had to provide financial support to many families in the far north of the island after the sea ice did not freeze hard enough for hunting, says Sara Olsvig, chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, which represents Inuit people from across Arctic nations.

The warming weather also makes life more dangerous for fishermen who have swapped their dog sleds for boats, because there is more rain instead of snow, says Morgan Angaju Josefsen Røjkjær, Kristensen's business partner.

When snow falls and is compressed, air is trapped between the flakes, giving the ice its brilliant white colour. But when rain freezes, the ice that forms contains little air and looks more like glass.

A fisherman can see the white ice and try to avoid it, but the ice formed from rain takes on the colour of the sea - and that's dangerous because "it can sink you or throw you off your boat," says Røjkjær.

Climate change, Olsvig says, "is affecting us deeply", and is amplified in the Arctic, which is **"warming three to four times faster than the global average"**.

## The glaciers are melting

Over the course of his lifetime, the Sermeq Kujalleq glacier has retreated by about 40 kilometres says Karl Sandgreen, 46, the head of Ilulissat's Icefjord Center which is dedicated to documenting the glacier and its icebergs.

Looking out of the window at hills which would normally be covered

with snow, Sandgreen describes mountain rock revealed by melting ice and a previously ice-covered valley inside the fjord where "there's nothing now".

Pollution is also speeding up the **ice melt**, Sandgreen says, describing how Sermeq Kujalleq is melting from the top down, unlike glaciers in Antarctica which largely melt from the bottom up as sea temperatures rise.

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This is exacerbated by two things: **black carbon**, or soot spewed from ship engines, and debris from volcanic eruptions. They blanket the snow and ice with dark material and reduce reflection of sunlight, instead absorbing more heat and speeding up melting. Black carbon has increased in recent decades with more ship traffic in the Arctic, and nearby Iceland has periodic volcanic eruptions.

Many Greenlanders told news agency AP they believe the melting ice is the reason Trump - a leader who has called climate change **"the greatest con job ever"** - wants to own the island.

"His agenda is to get the minerals," Sandgreen says.

Since Trump returned to office, fewer climate scientists from the US have visited Ilulissat, Sandgreen says. The US president needs to **"listen to the scientists"**, who are documenting the impact of global warming, he says.

## Teaching children about climate change

Kristensen says he tries to explain the consequences of global warming to the tourists who he takes out on dog sled rides or on visits to the icebergs. He says he tells them how Greenland's glaciers are as important as the **Amazon rainforest** in Brazil.

International summits, such as the **United Nations climate talks** in November in the Amazon gateway city of Belem, play a role, but it's just as important to "teach children all over the world" about the importance of ice and oceans, alongside subjects like maths, Kristensen says.

"If we don't **start with the children**, we can't really do anything to help nature. We can only destroy it," Kristensen says.



Jørgen Kristensen pets his sled dog before a ride in Ilulissat, Greenland, Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2026.