

Letter to the Prime Minister of Denmark

Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Denmark
Christiansborg
PrinsJørgensGård 11
1218 København K

Open Letter

Polar-Routen e.V.
Internationale Vereinigung für
Wandern und Naturschutz in Grönland
www.polarrouten.net



Dear Mrs. Prime Minister,
Dear Mrs. Mette Frederiksen,

11/06/2022

For six years, hikers in Greenland have been trying to save the Arctic's most famous hiking trail, the "Arctic Circle Trail" or the "Polar Route", from destruction by the construction of a senseless ATV road, without their concerns being heard in any way. In the last three years alone, a request has been forwarded to your government by UNESCO / WHC to review whether this region should be included in the List of World Heritage in Danger. However, so far your Ministry of Culture has not responded. We as applicants have not even received an acknowledgement of receipt. Instead, however, efforts are being made to create a fait accompli. Perhaps in a month's time, construction will begin on the last section of the road, the route through the Nerumaq Valley, which would mean the end of the Arctic Circle Trail / Polar Route.

Should all letters and petitions on paper go unanswered, I have promised the members of the association and the hikers on the Arctic Circle Trail that my last resort will be to use my naked body as my most precious parchment and write our request on it in the hope that at least this will be read*. I must now honour this promise in the face of the threat of road construction through the Nerumaq Valley. If I did not keep this promise, I would be far more ashamed of it than of being pictured naked in public.

I call for a temporary halt to construction and a thorough investigation.

With kind regards

Dr. Frieder Weisse

*) For this picture, click on this link www.polarrouten.net/dl/pictureen.php

Translation from Greenlandic

heading: „Unusual Message to the Prime Minister“

Text of the call: „Save the Arctic Circle Trail from destruction by the ATV road“

button: „The ATV road is nonsens.“

Download of this whole paper: <http://www.polarrouten.net/dl/letter-stm-en.pdf>

Download of the Danish paper: <http://www.polarrouten.net/dl/letter-stm-da.pdf>

Download of the German translation: <http://www.polarrouten.net/dl/letter-stm-de.pdf>

Annex - background of the open letter to the Danish Prime Minister

(Use the links in this PDF document to access documents relevant to the topic.)

Our appeal to the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Denmark is deliberately brief. For those who would like to know more about the background, here is a summary overview, but it also contains links to other documents about our association's activities to protect the hiking trail between Kangerlussuaq and Sisimiut and the World Heritage Site that the trail crosses.

We are a small association with a big goal, founded in 2011 on the "Arctic Circle Trail", the most famous hiking trail in the Arctic in Greenland, which was first called "Polar Route" like our association. The foundation was done in good agreement and in consultation with the municipality of Sisimiut (now merged into the municipality of Qeqqata) in order to organise a contribution by the hikers themselves to the preservation of this unique hiking trail. Then, when the campsite in Kangerlussuaq, right next to Greenland's international airport, operated by a tourism company was closed, after prolonged efforts (as the only interested party) we won the bid to reopen the campsite in Kangerlussuaq in late summer 2015. One of the first tasks we set ourselves for the time after the reopening in summer 2016 was the first and so far only count of hikers on the "Arctic Circle Trail", because this is very important for all the plans to preserve this trail. And with 1,290 hikers per year (2016), this number was more than double the highest estimate up to then. (The report on the count: www.polarrouten.net/dl/census2016.pdf (English and German) or www.polarrouten.net/dl/census2016en.pdf).

However, this new start was overshadowed by another event at that time. In November 2015, we - as the new campsite operator and as an institution committed to the preservation of the trail - were informed by the then tourism officer (destination manager) of Sisimiut that the municipality had decided to build a road for ATVs ("all terrain vehicles") between Sisimiut and Kangerlussuaq. A part of the hiking trail (the part through the Nerumaq valley, about a third of the trail) would then give way to the ATV road; but we shouldn't worry, because the hiking trail would be moved to a southern route passing Sarfannguit. However, a glance at the most popular hiking guide for the "Arctic Circle Trail" contained a clear warning against deviating from the (previously) marked route of the trail and choosing this southern route, because it would not only be uncomfortable and not very suitable for hiking, but its use would even be life-threatening in parts (www.polarrouten.net/dl/act-outdoor.pdf). Other information confirmed this to us. Thus, this offered diversion of the hiking trail via the southern route appeared to us as an attempt to disguise how the hiking trail would be sacrificed to the ATV road.

Thus, together with the first statistics on the number of hikers, we also conducted a survey on how hikers assessed the decided construction of the ATV road. There were five ratings to choose from, ranging from "horrible" to "not correct", "neutral" and "correct" to "excellent". Well over 90% of the answers were "horrible", only a few hikers wanted to be more polite and voted for "not correct". But the hikers were not satisfied with just this vote. And so, in consultation with the hikers, a trilingual (Danish, English, German) petition was drafted by the beginning of July 2016, entitled "Memorandum". This petition to the municipality proposed to renounce the construction of an ATV road and to establish a boat line instead, as it had existed a few years earlier. By the end of the season, 214 signatures had been collected, some as late as 2017; and with 300 signatures, the petition was closed. Together with the evaluation result of the count, the petition was sent by post to our contact in the municipality, its then deputy director, in early 2017. (the text of the memorandum in English: www.polarrouten.net/dl/memorandum-en.pdf and in Danish, English and German: www.polarrouten.net/dl/memorandum-3l.pdf). In autumn 2017, there was a lengthy debate in the municipal parliament on the subject of the construction of the road and related issues, about which minutes were also published on the municipality's website (www.geqqata.gl) with attached documents. This showed that our petition, the "memorandum", had not been presented to the local parliament. We never received a reply to our petition from the municipality.

Around the same time when I sent the "census", the first count of hikers on the Arctic Circle Trail, and the "memorandum", our petition, to the municipality, an application was submitted by the Danish government, also representing Greenland, to UNESCO's World Heritage Centre (WHC) to inscribe the region in West Greenland, which the Arctic Circle Trail crosses and which the ATV Road will soon also cross, on the World Heritage List as a 4,200-year-old cultural landscape. When I arrived in Kangerlussuaq in June 2017, where I had to manage the camping site, I also received a copy of this application, which had been printed as a book (ISBN: 978-87-87519-86-1). However, the text can also be downloaded as a PDF file from the internet (www.polarrouten.net/dl/aasivissuit-nipisat_final.pdf). The application was developed by a commission chaired by the aforementioned deputy director of the municipality. With this application to UNESCO, the problem had been raised to a new level. As a delegation from UNESCO was expected during my stay in Greenland in the summer of 2017 to find out about the planned World Heritage project, I addressed a letter to this delegation (www.polarrouten.net/dl/unesco-info.pdf), to which I attached documents on the subject.

As chairman of Polar-Routen e.V., I now had the task of writing letters to the government and parliament in Greenland, to the Danish government as a contractual partner of UNESCO, and to UNESCO itself (www.polarrouten.net/dl/apl2018-02-12.pdf). We received no response to this letter from the Danish delegation, which was UNESCO's negotiating partner. Admittedly, as an NGO in the registration procedure, we were not a negotiating partner of the World Heritage Centre (WHC) of UNESCO, but only the delegation of the Kingdom of Denmark as a contractual partner of UNESCO. But at least the WHC raised our concerns in the negotiations with

the Danish delegation. After the inscription on the World Heritage List, the minutes of the negotiations were published by UNESCO. So we could read that during the negotiations the Danish delegation brushed aside our concerns about the construction of the ATV road with a terse but unfortunately not factual remark: "There are absolutely no plans to upgrade the Arctic Circle Trail to any kind of ATV or dirt road". (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/163908>). And unfortunately, according to UNESCO's statutes, we could not participate in this debate and set the record straight. In the summer of 2018, I learned in Greenland that the decision had been taken to inscribe the region on the World Heritage List.

But this had also changed our status, because if a registered World Heritage property is threatened, e.g. by the construction of a traffic connection project like the ATV road, then a non-governmental organisation like our association has the right to demand a review of the endangerment by the WHC of UNESCO. In the case of another cultural landscape, the Elbe Valley near Dresden, where the Waldschlößchen Bridge was built, thus severing the cultural landscape, UNESCO ordered its exclusion from the World Heritage List. After all, the Waldschlößchenbrücke was a real transport object and a foot and not such a nonsensical object as ATV road. And if the principle of equality were to be observed to some extent, the reasons that have been recognised against the Elbe Valley should also apply to the Inuit hunting area in West Greenland. And so, in May 2019, our association submitted a request to UNESCO's WHC (download: www.polarrouten.net/dl/AplLoWHiD.pdf) to initiate a review process for inscription of this World Heritage region on the List of World Heritage in Danger. When I was in Greenland in the summer of 2019, I received an interim reply there (via email in the form of a PDF file: www.polarrouten.net/dl/whc-antwort.pdf) from the WHC secretariat that the WHC had decided to refer the application we had submitted to Denmark as the state party, i.e. to the Danish Ministry of Culture, for further processing. As a German saying goes: the WHC had thus turned the goat into the gardener. As can be seen from the representations on our website, we naturally also opposed this. The response we have received so far from the Danish Ministry of Culture as the institution now responsible on behalf of UNESCO can be summed up in one word: NOTHING.

Instead, however, a *fait accompli* has begun. In July 2020, the Greenlandic central government, which for half a century had rejected the road project as impractical and unaffordable, approved the construction of an ATV road, but with one restriction. The road would not be allowed to be built from Kangerlussuaq to Sisimiut, but only as far as to the fjord Kangerluarsuk Tulleq, which is separated from Sisimiut itself by a ridge about 600 m high that circles the town in a semicircle. The reason for this is to protect Sisimiut's drinking water supply.

When an article appeared on the Qeqqata Municipality website about seven years ago to introduce the plan for an ATV road into the discussion, it began with the words:

"An ATV track between Sisimiut and Kangerlussuaq will be the first step towards a road between Sisimiut and Kangerlussuaq. An ATV track probably cannot be open all year like a road, partly because thaws in May / June would destroy nature, partly because it is not financially feasible to keep the track clear of snow in winter. But an ATV track would give an enormous boost to tourism and transport between Sisimiut and Kangerlussuaq in summer.

...

The former municipality of Sisimiut and the subsequent municipality of Qeqqata have expressed a desire to complete a road between Sisimiut and Kangerlussuaq. It has been estimated that a two-lane unpaved gravel road would cost between three hundred and five hundred million kroner, which is beyond financial feasibility.

As an alternative, it is considered possible for the municipality to start building an ATV track, which could eventually be expanded into a road."

(Source: https://www.qeqqata.gl/Emner/Om_kommunen/Kangerlussuaq_vej?sc_lang=da . Danish text: www.polarrouten.net/dl/atv-road-da.pdf - English: www.polarrouten.net/dl/atv-road-en.pdf)

This quote refers to the dispute that stretched over about 50 years between politicians in the municipality of Sisimiut / Qeqqata, who demanded the construction of the road, and the central government (first the Greenland Ministry in Copenhagen, then the government in Nuuk), which had rejected the construction of such a road as a waste of money. The construction of the ATV road was presented as a compromise. However, it was explained to the local population, especially the 500 inhabitants of Kangerlussuaq, that the ATV road would only be a first step, to be followed by a real road. This would then establish a connection for passenger and freight traffic with the rest of Greenland, independent of air traffic, which had ended more than a decade earlier with the termination of the shipping connection between Kangerlussuaq and Sisimiut.

But the whole argument is inconclusive. It costs no less to upgrade an ATV road without a roadbed between Kangerlussuaq and Sisimiut to a real road with a roadbed than to build a real road immediately. But if the latter is not affordable, then neither is the former. In addition to this financial argument against the ATV road and the prospect of its upgrading to a real road, there is another argument in the above-mentioned approval notice: a road from Kangerlussuaq only as far as the Kangerluarsuk-Tulleq fjord, which - as a condition of approval in the approval notice - may not be continued to Sisimiut, would be completely useless as a transport link.

As I was told by someone from Kangerlussuaq in the summer of 2020, the start of the project with the ATV road was apparently a big failure that had not delivered nearly what had been promised before. For example, it had been announced that the construction of 800 m of road per day was expected. The actual construction work (fortunately) fell well short of this. Apparently, the management of the road construction project was under great pressure. Probably for this reason, an article in English about the road was published in a magazine dated 30.11.2020 (<https://polarconnection.org/arctic-circle-road/>), which purports to reproduce an interview with the mayor of Qeqqata, Malik Berthelsen, under the title "The Arctic Circle Road: The Road to Freedom?". The article begins with a picture of the beginning of the ATV road, which I have reproduced below on the left. On the right is a photo of the same place that I took myself in the summer of 2021.



Sometimes a single picture can speak more clearly than a long technical article. The picture above on the right at least says very clearly that the ATV road under construction is not a "road to freedom", that it is not an asset to the World Heritage Site either and that the displacement of the hiking trail by it, if it happens, will be a great loss.

At the end of this attachment, I would like to send you a link to an advertising brochure, directed to potential investors and produced at great expense, the title of its English version is "Tourism Development by the Arctic Circle Road": www.polarrouten.net/dl/TourismDevelopmentByTheArcticCircleRoad.pdf and which attempts to relentlessly exploit this unique region economically (https://www.qeqqata.gl/emner/om_kommunen/atcr?sc_lang=da). The fact that the goal pursued in it, the construction of the ATV road, practically means the end of the hiking trail as it still exists, has not stopped the author from praising precisely this hiking trail in the first chapter (page 4) as the "the Arctic Camino". And there you will also find the sentence: "A German hiking enthusiast has been walking the Arctic Circle Trail every year for the past 10 years." That's me. The brochure thus still attempts to exploit my commitment to preserving the Arctic's most important hiking trail for its destruction. I hope to put an end to this attempt by publishing my "Open Letter".

F.W.

Our organisation: "Polar-Routen e.V. - International Association for Hiking and Nature Conservation in Greenland".

Our address in Greenland: Campingplads - 3910 Kangerlussuaq - Phone: 0299 - 22 33 99

Our address in Germany: Polar-Routen e.V. - Postfach 390 112 - D-14091 Berlin

E-mail: info@polarrouten.net *Internet:* www.polarrouten.net