

LETTER TO THE EDITOR:

‘Arctic’ or ‘arctic’?

Dear Editor:

A recent meeting on climate change and its possible effects on Arctic ecosystems left one clear impression—of confusion about whether to capitalize the word ‘Arctic.’ Many presenters hedged their bets by using both upper- and lower-case initials, on the same slide. I analyse here some thoughts on the subject—etymology, analogy, and grammar—and suggest a logical approach.

First, etymology: ‘arktos’ is Greek for a bear—any bear. But ‘Arktos’ is The Bear—the northern constellation called the Great Bear, the Plough, the Big Dipper, or Charles’s Wain. And ‘-ikos’ is an adjectival termination, so ‘Arktikos’ refers to the regions under the constellation—the far north. ‘Arctic’ (like other words ending in ‘-ic’) is in origin an adjective—but an adjective derived from a proper noun. Of course, it is also much used as a proper noun, ‘the Arctic’ being the expression we use to refer to the region of the far north, and it is appropriately capitalized in that use.

Divergences of usage arise when the word appears attributively—‘an Arctic river,’ or ‘Arctic tundra.’ One school of thought reasons that in this construction ‘Arctic’ is an adjective, adjectives are not capitalized in English, and therefore ‘Arctic’ should have a lower-case initial.

This reasoning is doubly fallacious. Firstly, ‘Canadian,’ ‘French,’ and many others show that English adjectives derived from proper nouns can quite well have capital letters—the assertion that they cannot is heard only in pleading for a lower-case initial for ‘Arctic.’ Secondly, ‘Arctic’ in these constructions is not an adjective, but an attributive use of the noun itself, which stands before another noun, as is common in English and some other languages, to describe it. A test for an adjective is whether a word can be used predicatively: for example, the difference between ‘a small vehicle’ and ‘a passenger vehicle’ is seen by comparing the predicative construction ‘that vehicle is small’ with ‘that vehicle is passenger.’ ‘Arctic,’ in the sense we mean it here, is not used predicatively: we

hear for example ‘those are Arctic scientists’ but not ‘the scientists in that group are Arctic’ or ‘this is an Arctic community’ but not ‘that community is Arctic.’ When we talk about ‘an Arctic scientist’ or ‘an Arctic community’ we make direct reference to the Arctic itself, we are using not an adjective, but the noun, to describe the one or the other, and the upper-case initial is appropriate.

A useful analogy is ‘Atlantic,’ like ‘Arctic’ in origin an adjective and referring to a natural feature (the Atlas Mountains) and the associated direction or regions. Like ‘Arctic,’ ‘Atlantic’ has no predicative use. It retains its capital A in all uses.

However, there is a use for ‘arctic’ that is truly adjectival, and that is the metaphorical or hyperbolic use. The shivering commuter on the corner of Portage and Main grumbling ‘That wind is arctic this evening!’ is using ‘arctic’ as a true adjective. The predicative use is legitimate, no reference to the Arctic is intended—the meaning is only ‘very cold’—and the lower-case initial is appropriate.

‘Arctic,’ therefore, is best capitalized in all uses, both substantive and attributive, that refer to the Arctic itself. The lower-case can then be usefully reserved to distinguish the metaphorical use which means no more than ‘very cold.’

What about compounds, where a prefix is added to the noun? A useful model is found in ‘un-American’ or ‘pan-European’; i.e., hyphenate and use a lower-case initial on the prefix, giving, for example, ‘sub-Arctic habitats.’

Two minor points support the upper-case initial. The first is practical: irregularities in a page of print help the reader’s eye to navigate, and capital letters are helpful. The second is perhaps political: no one with a serious interest in the Arctic should consent to see the name of the region that occupies his thoughts—and to which he devotes his existence—spelled, under any excuse, with a lower-case initial!

Michael C.S. Kingsley
Greenland Institute of Natural Resources
P.O. Box 570
3900 Nuuk
Greenland