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LOUWRENS HACQUEBORD (1947–2026)



Louwrens Hacquebord at Spitsbergen, Norway. Photo: Ben Bekooy.

With the passing of Louwrens Hacquebord on 30 April 2026, the world lost a visionary and vibrant figure in polar research.

Louwrens studied physical geography, historical geography, and archaeology at the universities of Utrecht and Groningen. In 1984, he was awarded a doctorate *cum laude* from the University of Amsterdam for his ground-breaking research on Smeerenburg, the 17th-century Dutch whaling settlement on Spitsbergen. As the first to excavate the site, he uncovered the remains of blubber cookeries, houses, and graves, revealing a stark reality far removed from the romanticized depictions in paintings and written accounts. Smeerenburg was, in truth, a harsh, industrially organized seasonal settlement where young men toiled under brutal conditions, often not surviving to old age. Among the most poignant discoveries were the woollen caps, remarkably preserved, now on permanent display at the Rijksmuseum, simple artifacts that opened a window into a forgotten chapter of history. Susan Barr, former cultural heritage officer for Svalbard and Jan Mayen, once noted, "The Smeerenburg excavations (1979–82) were the most successful archaeological project ever carried out in Svalbard, pioneering in their thoroughness and multidisciplinary approach to uncovering the true story of the whaling station."

Louwrens joined the Arctic Centre, University of Groningen, as a researcher in the late 1970s, quickly gaining national acclaim for leading the Smeerenburg excavations. The exceptionally well-preserved textiles found in the whalers' graves offered an unprecedented glimpse into 17th-century workwear in extreme conditions, inspiring an exhibition at the Rijksmuseum, where the hats remain part of the permanent collection.

His research extended beyond Spitsbergen to, among others, Greenland, Jan Mayen, Antarctica, and Novaya Zemlya. In 1992, he led an expedition to investigate the remains of the Behouden Huys, the shelter used by Willem Barentsz and his crew during their fateful overwintering. The trip took place amid concerns about nuclear testing on Novaya Zemlya, leading to a memorable moment: the team forgot to check radiation levels with their Geiger counter until after their helicopter had departed. When they finally measured, the levels were lower than in Amsterdam, a relief that allowed their work to continue.

As a teacher, Louwrens was a source of inspiration, suggesting his students seize opportunities to experience

the polar regions first-hand. When one student asked why he didn't organize such trips himself, he did just that. From 1994 to 2002, he and Frits Steenhuisen led groups of students on self-supported hiking expeditions in Svalbard, creating unforgettable experiences for all involved. Such adventures would be unthinkable today due to the risks posed by polar bears.

Louwrens shared his passion far beyond the classroom. A frequent presence in the media, he delivered public lectures and authored books for general audiences, bridging the gap between polar research and Dutch polar policy. His advocacy played a pivotal role in the Netherlands joining the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) as a founding member in 1992. He later served as vice-chair and spent eight years on the IASC Executive Committee, championing the integration of social sciences and humanities into polar research.

He was instrumental in securing observer status for the Netherlands in the Arctic Council and contributed significantly to the country's involvement in Antarctic governance. His participation in the 1990–91 Dutch expedition to Antarctica helped pave the way for the Netherlands to achieve consultative status under the Antarctic Treaty the following year.

Louwrens was a pioneer in every sense, a researcher ahead of his time. He forged partnerships with industry to fund fieldwork, maintained a vast international network, and excelled in public engagement long before such outreach became standard. His mentorship was invaluable to young researchers, many of whom credit his encouragement for their careers in polar science.

In 2011, Louwrens was honoured as an Officer in the Order of Orange-Nassau for his transformative contributions to Dutch polar research and his central role in shaping a generation of polar scientists. His legacy endures in the discoveries he made, the knowledge he shared, and the lives he inspired.

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