

Title:

Uncomfortable past: Qullissat coal mine as colonial memory and built heritage

Abstract:

This paper presents insights into how negotiations of colonial past influences present understandings of the value of preserving and presenting coal mining and other industrial facilities as part of the Greenlandic cultural heritage. The coal mine at Qullissat on Disko Island was in use from 1924 until 1972, when Danish authorities shut down production and closed the entire settlement – moving workers, families and even the local church to the mainland. At its peak Qullissat had around 550 residents, a school, clinic, and stores, and even sparked Greenland's first trade Union. In total around 570.000 tons of coal was mined. Today tourists, will find the ghostly remains of abandoned industry and miners' dwellings, but in the summertime also a small community of descendants of former miners' families, keeping the memory of Qullissat alive and using parts of the settlement as vacation houses. The closing of the settlement and relocation of all residents is still a point of controversy in modern day Greenland. It is seen by some, as an example of colonial brutality and keeps reappearing in the debate on future Greenlandic sovereignty and decolonization. It is a place of great symbolic value, inspiring art, songs and poetry, and many families have at least some connections to either the settlement or to the social or economic effects of having been forcibly moved. As there are strong feelings around Qullissat it is perhaps surprising, that no steps are taken to preserve either this site or in general the memory of early Greenlandic industrial history and heritage. 2022 is the 50 years anniversary of the closing of the mine and also marks the starting point in an effort by the Greenlandic National Museum to create focus and interest around this important part of the country's national history. Based on general representations of Greenlandic history and of technological and industrial development, this paper offers insights into rise and demise of Qullissat, and draws on research in uncomfortable heritage, heritage preservation and dissemination to offer a glimpse into a possible future for Greenlandic industrial heritage.