THE FUTURE OF THE ARCTIC OBSERVING SUMMIT

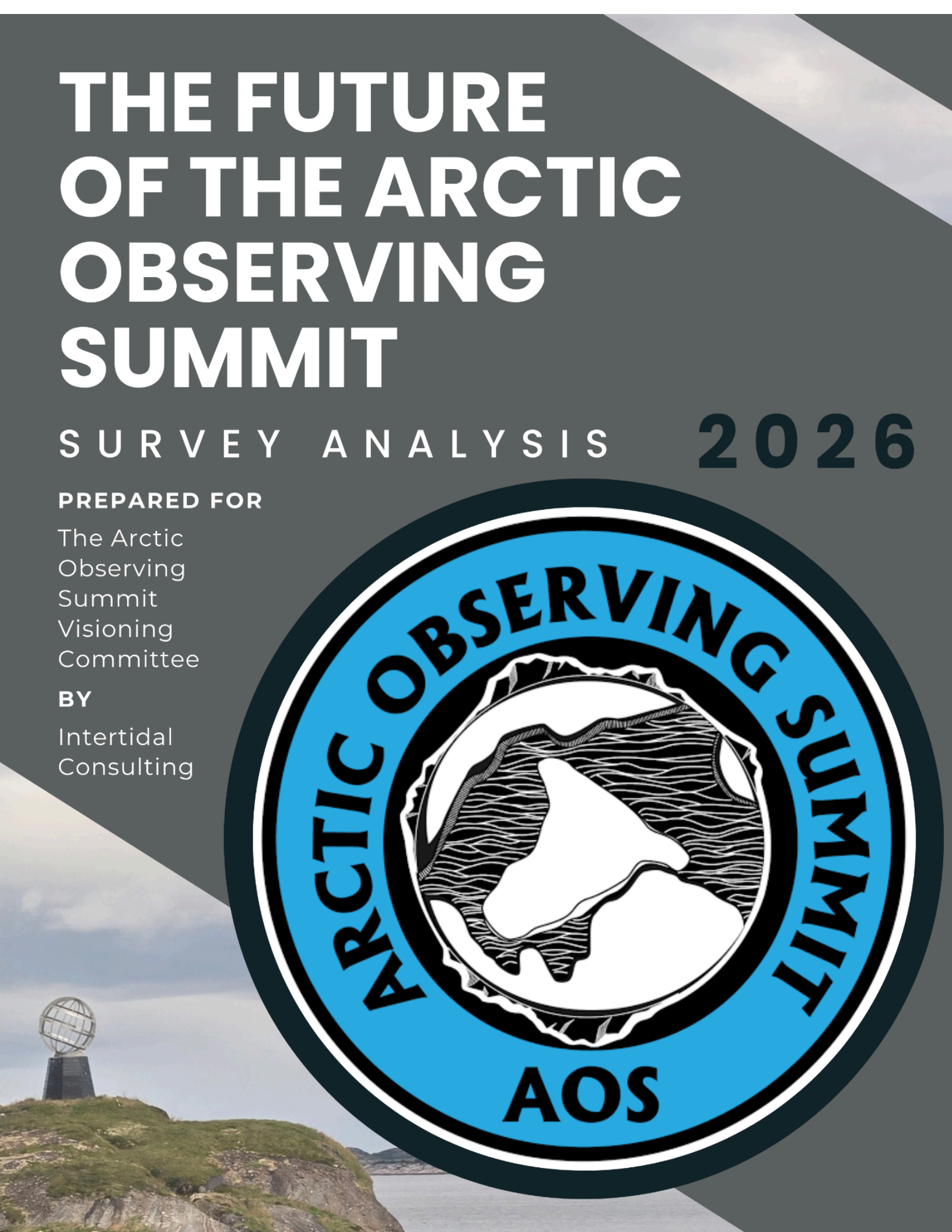
SURVEY ANALYSIS 2026

PREPARED FOR

The Arctic Observing Summit Visioning Committee

BY

Intertidal Consulting



Survey Results Analysis

The Future of the Arctic Observing Summit

Prepared By: Jamie O'Connor, Intertidal Consulting
For: The Arctic Observing Summit Visioning Committee
September 21, 2026

Executive Summary 2
Who Responded 3
Community Priorities 3
Looking Toward IPY 5 4
In Their Own Words: Suggestions for Improvement 4
In Their Own Words: Challenges and Negative Experiences 5
Reinforcing a Welcoming Space 6
In Their Own Words: Positive Experiences 6
Conclusion 7
Action Memo 7
Appendix: Survey Questions 8

Executive Summary

In July 2026, Intertidal Consulting conducted a survey in partnership with the Arctic Observing Summit (AOS) visioning committee to learn how the broader AOS community views the Summit and how they'd like to see it progress into its next chapter. Over several weeks, 132 people from 25 countries provided structured feedback on AOS' priorities and format with open-ended commentary, quoted anonymously throughout this report. Responses reflected a shared vision for AOS' core purpose and described a clear set of goals for the years ahead. The data also surfaced disagreement on scale and how AOS should balance Indigenous Knowledge with other constituencies, along with reports of behavior that warrants a direct response from organizers. An action memo sequences the survey feedback into decisions the committee can act on, decisions that need a budget first, and open questions that need the committee's judgment.

Who Responded

Among respondents who named a country, 62% (76 of 123) came from just four: the United States, Norway, Canada, and Germany; the remaining 20 countries are represented by a handful of responses each. Fifty-six percent work in physical and earth sciences, 27% in biological sciences, and 24% in policy and governance.

Respondents' relationship to AOS varied widely: 30% were familiar with the Summit but had never attended, 28% had attended once or twice, 17% were unfamiliar with it altogether, 15% had co-chaired a session or working group, and 10% had held a leadership role. Twenty-eight respondents, 21% of the sample, left every open-ended question blank, and of the 21 respondents unfamiliar with AOS and who have never attended, only 11 provided long-form comments. The quotes in this report illustrate themes among engaged respondents. The survey did not ask respondents to self-identify as Indigenous. Several describe experiences on behalf of or alongside Indigenous colleagues, but we cannot report how many respondents identify as Indigenous themselves.

Community Priorities

Respondents were largely aligned on AOS' core purpose and shape. Respondents ranked AOS' key audience and participants, with the Arctic science and research community first (89%), followed by Indigenous Peoples and Arctic communities (75%) and policy and decision-makers (61%). Three-quarters selected developing observing recommendations as a primary goal, closely followed by informing policy priorities (66%), coordinating pan-Arctic initiatives (71%), networking with collaborators and funders (74%), and advocating for the importance of Arctic observing (65%). A majority want AOS to keep its current two-year cadence (68%) and remain a component of Arctic Science Summit Week (ASSW) (56%). On format, open working groups were the clear favorite (64%), followed by a hybrid mix of working groups and independent sessions (57%) and an open call for session proposals (54%); plenary panels (34%) and asynchronous online engagement (17%).

Asked which organizations should benefit from AOS recommendations, 79 respondents named specific groups. Research institutions and the broader science community were named most often (23 mentions), followed by governments and policy-makers (22), funders (21), and Indigenous or community organizations (19). Existing coordination bodies were named less often by name: Sustaining Arctic Observing Networks (SAON) (10 mentions), Arctic Council working groups (9), and the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) (7).

Networking topped the list of reasons respondents participate in AOS: AOS was repeatedly described as a rare chance to build in-person relationships with

international collaborators and funders, several of which grew into funded proposals and lasting partnerships. A second theme was cross-sector exchange, the chance to sit in the same room as researchers, policymakers, funders, and Indigenous communities and leave with a broader view of Arctic observing than any single discipline provides. A third was AOS′ role in centering Indigenous Knowledge; many respondents, especially those working in Indigenous Knowledge and policy, said this has historically set AOS apart, though the work of sharing real authority remains unfinished. Finally, respondents valued AOS′ function of translating observing priorities into policy and funding action, and its role as an entry point for early-career researchers.

On governance, they asked for a funded, dedicated coordinator to carry planning between summits, rotating chairs, and a clearer code of conduct. Indigenous leadership sat at the center of this vision: respondents want AOS to treat Indigenous Peoples as rights holders with real authority over agenda-setting, backed by sustained funding for Indigenous-led monitoring and participation. They also want AOS recommendations to carry more weight, through consistent follow-through, public reporting, and deeper engagement with funders and ministerial-level decision-makers to fill the gap left by the paused Arctic Science Ministerial.

On structure, respondents want to keep the open, informal exchange they credit with their best connections while cutting the repetition several described as unfocused, through smaller task-oriented working groups, fewer concurrent tracks, and room for practitioners alongside researchers.

On logistics, most want AOS to stay attached to ASSW but scheduled earlier in the week rather than at its tail end, with hybrid options preserved for those without full travel budgets.

Looking Toward IPY 5

The survey asked open-ended questions on the changing observing landscape, priorities for IPY 5, and past experience. Respondents want AOS to serve as the community′s preparatory forum for IPY 5: clear objectives for each summit, dedicated working groups that close observing gaps, and a structured link to the IPY International Project Office so recommendations feed directly into IPY 5 planning.

In Their Own Words: Suggestions for Improvement

Asked how AOS could improve, respondents offered specific, often pragmatic, ideas. Quotes below are verbatim from survey responses; ellipses mark where text has been trimmed for length or to preserve anonymity.

> *"I think the AOS would benefit enormously from a dedicated, funded facilitator. In addition to assisting with the planning and revisioning of the AOS, they should support the Chairs in strategic communication of the AOS recommendations with the goal of advocating for arctic observing and encouraging forward momentum in the policy and funder spaces toward community-led observing goals."*
>
> *"I would like to see an AOS advisory board made up of funders/ministerial types from various bodies (in lieu of ASM). They do no organizing work, but they do things like reviewing session proposals and posing questions that the sessions could address."*
>
> *"Scale up to a bigger, more professional, high-budget event. Requires more institutional sponsorship, bigger commitment of hosts, etc. Consider using experienced conference agency to deliver logistical and organisational aspects. Align with wider developments in observing internationally around the world, in all environmental domains. Ocean Decade, Cryosphere Decade, BBNJ, etc. Break out of the Arctic bubble."*
>
> *"There is not just one way for the AOS to be. There are many viable visions. But we need a clearly articulated, shared vision of what the AOS is, and perhaps also what it is not, to move forward effectively."*
>
> *"I think if the community wants to move beyond being an event that happens every to years and more into influencing how science/knowledge production happens in the North then it likely needs some sort of base funding that would at least support a part time or contracted coordinator who reports to a steering committee."*
>
> *"Make some sessions as a hybrid with online digital attendance for those who has no budget to attend the venue. Record keynote sessions that can be broadcasted after the meeting."*

In Their Own Words: Challenges and Negative Experiences

Others described experiences that left room for AOS to improve participant experiences:

> *"AOS leadership watered down the recommendations to governments and lost the attention as they did not have to follow up anything. More ambition for what can be achieved would be the start."*
>
> *"There are those who lead who are phoning it in. They don't have capacity to actually lead. To bring in people to really develop products that are meaningful. It lacks clear vision for goals. The topics are repetitive, without any progress."*
>
> *"...if I were a newcomer to AOS as I was during the pandemic, the barrier to entry is relatively high. In other words, it's hard to understand how to get involved in a particular activity. Everyone seems to know each other and be working closely together. A more equitable way to volunteer your time and get involved is sorely needed."*
>
> *"There's almost always one or two disruptive folks at the AOS. It's unavoidable. Having a strong code of conduct and process for addressing issues helps keep the meeting on track and keeps people from burning out...."*

> *"This is not negative about AOS, but my own lack of capacity to engage deeply when AOS' in-person gathering follows ASSW has been a challenge. The pool of folks who work in and adjacent to arctic observing is fairly small, so I understand wanting to connect it with another conference, but would hope to integrate or be the first few days in the future."*
>
> *"When we were doing working groups, there was persistent jockeying for influence over the focus and structure of those working groups. ... The working group model has a lot of strengths in terms of accomplishing directed tasks, but the non-working group model is more equitable and easier to administer. For AOS 2028, I'd recommend a non-working group model."*

Reinforcing a Welcoming Space

Several respondents, independently of each other, described experiences beyond ordinary conference friction:

> *"Some of my Arctic Indigenous colleagues reported insensitive and disrespectful behaviour by some (few) scientists against them during the AOS. This should not be tolerated, and scientists need to get better educated about Indigenous rights and issues (including the history of colonialism in the Arctic)..."*
>
> *"Not to me directly, but I have heard from Indigenous partners reflections on 'the good and the bad' around AOS meetings, feeling simultaneously grateful to be there and have their perspectives heard while also feeling alone, tokenized, and drained from their interactions at times."*
>
> *"After decades of engagement, being told I haven't and should consider other venues."*
>
> *"Once I gave what I thought could be progressive talk advocating for the value of international coordinated observations in the Central Arctic Ocean... and some sociologist... got up and complained that with all the problems the indigenous was having, what we were doing out in the middle of the Arctic Ocean was 'immoral'. That was the last time I bothered with AOS."*

Action memo item A1 addresses this by recommending a published code of conduct with a named reporting path and visible follow-through, adopted before the next AOS.

In Their Own Words: Positive Experiences

Many respondents described positive impressions of the AOS:

> *"There are so many great people. I've had a lot of good conversations, including several that have taken small ideas and turned them into proposals. I owe a large chunk of my career to conversations that have come out of AOS sessions."*
>
> *"I have relished the opportunity to connect with international and Tribal colleagues at these meetings, in particular. The rotation of the meeting also allows you to experience the different country contexts in which participants come from..."*

> *"It was great to see the Indigenous content and participation grow, and forming a big part of AOS and SAON. It would be good to ensure some Arctic Indigenous leadership in the AOS, and funding opportunities that make the engagement sustainable."*
>
> *"I liked the openess in discussions at the AOS in Fairbanks in 2016."*
>
> *"Many of the best experiences at AOS happen outside the formal sessions. ... The AOS needs more space for informal discussion (physical space and time on the agenda), space for families/kids, space for rest. Having it at the end of ASSW means many folks are already very tired and unavailable. My dream is to have a meeting that actually feels rejuvenating to most folks who attend."*

Conclusion

Respondents describe a future AOS with a clearly stated purpose, leadership resourced to carry that purpose between meetings, flexibility to foster connection, and enough structure to turn goodwill into results. Much of the foundation already exists. The current AOS, and the volunteers and organizers who run it, built the community goodwill this survey draws on. The survey also names specific gaps: in follow-through, in accountability, and in resourcing, several of which need a direct response from the organizers and visioning committee. IPY 5 in 2032–33 gives the committee a multi-year runway to continue the AOS' positive trajectory.

Action Memo

To: AOS Visioning Committee

From: Intertidal Consulting

Re: Priority decisions from the 2026 community survey

This memo highlights what is ready to act on, what needs a budget decision, and where the survey does not provide a clear direction.

A. Ready to act before the next AOS, no significant budget required

1. Update and publish a code of conduct with a named reporting path. Multiple respondents, independently of each other, described disrespectful and racist behavior toward Indigenous participants.
2. Publish a short, plain statement of what AOS is and is not. Several respondents said they could not tell how AOS differs from ASSW's business and community meetings, or what its guiding goals actually are.
3. Move AOS earlier in the ASSW week. The current tail-end slot was repeatedly cited as a reason attendees disengage before AOS begins.
4. Formalize an onboarding process for first-time attendees and new working group members, to lower the barrier to entry respondents described as feeling like an "exclusive club."

5. Publish a public accounting of past AOS recommendations: what was adopted, what wasn't, and why.

B. Requires a budget decision, scope, cost, and funding source before committing

- Fund a part-time or contracted coordinator reporting to the steering committee. This is the single most-requested structural change in the survey.
- Convene an advisory board of funders and ministerial-level representatives in lieu of the paused Arctic Science Ministerial.
- Develop a sponsor for travel support for early-career and Indigenous participants.

C. Needs committee judgment

- State explicitly whether AOS should grow into a larger event
- Clarify how AOS names its commitment to incorporating Indigenous Knowledge and governance.

D. Building toward IPY 5 (2032–33)

- Establish a structured link to the IPY International Project Office so AOS recommendations feed IPY 5 planning.
- Charter dedicated working groups now to identify and close observing gaps ahead of IPY 5.
- Define measurable markers of progress tied to this survey.

Appendix: Survey Questions

The survey consisted of the following questions, distributed to the AOS community in June and July 2026:

1. What research discipline or sector brings you to AOS? (select all that apply)
2. What country do you base your work from?
3. Are you involved in any of the following organizations, including their committees and working groups?
4. What is your familiarity with AOS?
5. Why do you participate in AOS? What is its value to you and your work?
6. What do you believe the primary goals of AOS should be? (select all that apply)
7. Of the priorities you selected above, which is your top priority?
8. Who do you believe the key stakeholders of AOS should be? (Select all that apply)
9. Which organization(s) should benefit from recommendations drafted during the AOS?
10. How often should AOS be held? It is currently held every two years.

11. What kind of working format do you believe serves AOS best? (select all that apply)
12. What hosting format would you prefer for the AOS in future?
13. How has the Arctic observing landscape changed in ways that should shape AOS' future structure, hosting model, or priorities?
14. How might AOS adjust its structure, hosting model, or priorities in the lead-up to the Fifth International Polar Year (IPY 5)?
15. Have you had any particularly positive experiences with AOS in the past? What can AOS do to cultivate those experiences?
16. Have you had any particularly negative experiences with AOS in the past? How can AOS improve?
17. Do you have any other comments or suggestions for the future of AOS?
18. If you would like us to follow up with future updates on the revisioning of AOS, please provide your email address below. Providing your email is optional and will not be linked to your survey responses.