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Bringing back the barley

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From The Economist print edition

Mild weather in Greenland pleases some but not others

THE Middle Ages were unusually warm in northern Europe, and it was during that period that the Vikings settled in Greenland. They cultivated land, growing mostly barley. The climate then cooled down, which made the place too chilly for arable farming. These days Greenland's 56,000 people rely largely on sheep farming in the south, hunting in the north and fishing in the west.

Or at least they did until the world started warming up again. Average temperatures in Greenland have risen by 1.5°C over the past 30 years. The barley is back. Kenneth Hoeth has been growing it, but only as an experiment. Several farmers in southern Greenland are now farming potatoes, turnips and iceberg lettuces commercially. Mr Hoeth is trying out other crops: he is pleased with his Chinese cabbage, which he says is particularly crispy.

The weather has helped sheep farming, too. Sheep are kept in barns all winter and have to be fed with hay or other fodder. Because grass grows more plentifully these days, sheep farmers need to import less fodder, so costs have fallen. The only downside, says Mr Hoeth, is bugs: caterpillars are proliferating. But, he says, "generally the warming is good for us."

Not everybody in Greenland is so pleased, though. Hunters in the north, who catch narwhals, seals, walrus and polar bears, use dog sledges, which are tricky to use when the ice melts and the soil is mushy. The weather is less predictable, too. "Earlier," says Alfred Jacobsen, Greenland's deputy minister for environment and nature, "local people could count on the weather. Now they don't know whether there will be a north wind, which brings stable weather, or a south one, which brings snowstorms."

And for the fishermen in the west, who use big trawlers to catch shrimp, it could go either way. "Ice can be a problem for us," says Jens Lyberth of the Fisheries and Exports branch of the Greenland Employers' Association. "Less ice is less problem." And cod, which used to be plentiful until the 1960s, then disappeared, are coming back; but cod eat the shrimp the fishermen are after.

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