

Stop talking - start protecting

The Arctic environment is under immense pressure from climate change, ocean acidification and pollution. While this unique environment is undergoing rapid and dramatic changes, the Arctic Council has kept talking and showed limited ability to turn own words of protection into practice. Greenpeace is calling for the Arctic Council to step up and protect the Arctic against additional threats from dangerous shipping, oil exploitation, bottom-trawling, over-fishing and other destructive industrial practices.

Rapid environmental changes in the Arctic

The part of the Arctic Ocean covered by summer sea ice was 31 percent smaller in 2010 than the 1979-2000 average. That loss of sea ice habitat equals two times the size of Norway, Sweden and Denmark combined¹. The downward trend is dangerously clear.

In addition to sea ice loss, the Arctic region is also experiencing increased glacier melting and tundra thawing, as recently reported by the AMAP group, which is now tripling recent IPCC sea level rise estimates. AMAP also presented alarming figures on increase of mercury², possibly from coal fired power plants, in Polar food-chains. On top of this comes the threat from ocean acidification, which is also believed to hit the Arctic regions first and hardest. The problem with acidification can according to many scientists not be overrated as it changes the entire marine ecosystem.

Most of these challenges to the Arctic environment and its people have been well documented by Arctic Council working groups like CAFF and AMAP. These bodies have to a large degree helped to identify and highlight the specific Arctic problems and challenges. Thanks to their work, these impacts of climate change in the Arctic are been seen by many as the 'canary in the coal mine' or an 'IQ test from Mother Earth'. We know the danger, we have heard the message. The question is what we do about it.

¹ <http://www.arctic.noaa.gov/reportcard/seaice.html>

² <http://amap.no/documents/index.cfm?action=getfile&dirsub=&filename=86254%5Fmercury%5Fii-vi-no%20rec.pdf&sort=default>

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Industries move, politicians don't

As a consequence of the melting ice, new areas are being made accessible for industrial exploitation. The global oil and fishing industry has already moved in, shipping routes and tourist cruises change their traditional patterns, and mining companies see opportunities both on land and off shore.

This new, increased interest from industrial actors adds pressure to an already overburdened Arctic environment. Many NGOs and scientific institutions have pointed to the need for a better governance regime, including marine reserves³, as the Arctic is now opening up. However, the political response to the combined pressure on the Arctic has not been impressive.

On the positive side, we will note this week's SAR deal by the Arctic Council, and the US ban on commercial fishing North of the Bering from 2009. In April 2011, also Canada, in cooperation with the Inuvialuit people, decided not to issue new commercial fishing licenses in the Beaufort Sea until a complete management plan is established. No such agreements, even on fisheries, are yet in place on the Atlantic side of the Polar basin.

Ever since the Nuuk declaration from 1993⁴, the current Arctic Council members have agreed to a number of action points to protect the Arctic environment. Most of these have never materialized, although the scientific bodies of the Arctic Council has been a solid supplier of dramatic scientific evidence of the rapid and concerning changes in the region. Many of the Arctic states have neither ratified key multilateral agreements with Arctic relevance, including the Espoo convention, UNCLOS, CBD and others. The Arctic Council guidelines for oil and gas⁵ development are only voluntary guidelines and therefore often not followed, and lack the precision level needed to provide real enforceable rules. The same problem applies to the IMO Polar Code⁶, which has not been used by the Arctic states independently.

Arctic Councils inaction costs

The ecosystem of the Arctic and Arctic Ocean needs protection to adapt to the rapid changes. That is not happening. Instead the Arctic Ocean will this summer be exposed to four drillings out off Greenland's westcoast releasing at least

³ See for example recent report by IUCN and NRDC http://docs.nrdc.org/oceans/files/oce_11042501a.pdf

⁴ 1993 Nuuk Declaration <http://arctic-council.org/filearchive/The%20Nuuk%20Declaration.pdf>

⁵ <http://arctic-council.org/filearchive/Arctic%20Offshore%20Oil%20and%20Gas%20Guidelines%202009.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.imo.org/ourwork/safety/safetytopics/pages/polarshippingsafety.aspx>

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9,000 tons of chemicals, some even red-listed and most not tested in Arctic waters. The planned drillings will go down to 1500 meter water depth, they will go as north as xx latitude and the drillings are planned to last till end of November, where the risk of sea ice is fairly high in northern waters.

The lack of a strong governance of the Arctic region the oil drilling may happen as a race between weakest regulations with increased risks and immediate pollution as a consequence. It also means that shipping is growing before any environmental and safety standards are set and commercial fishing destroy the seabed and stocks before they have even been studied.

If the Arctic Council does not step up to expectations to protect the Arctic Ocean, other bodies will eventually take over its role in practice. Most likely this will be the less open, less participatory and less transparent Arctic 5 consisting of Russia, Norway, Denmark/Greenland, Canada and USA. This club of countries with direct economic interests in the Arctic has already met twice under secret conditions. The Arctic Ocean should be seen as a global commons and not as a cake that can discretely be split between a few nations. Unless the Arctic Council shows sufficient and credible environmental leadership, in practice, for the protection of the Arctic Ocean, the legitimacy of keeping others away from the decision is weakened.

Protection needed

With the dramatic changes in the Arctic ecosystems and the immediate threats from a desperate and risk-taking oil industry, oversized fishing fleet and polluting shipping protection of the Arctic Ocean is desperately needed. We call for Arctic Council to make words of protection into action:

- ✓ Place an immediate moratorium on industrial exploitation within the area that has historically been covered by sea ice until sufficient governance is in place
- ✓ Stop all new offshore oil and gas drillings in the Arctic
- ✓ Make the current IMO Polar code mandatory

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