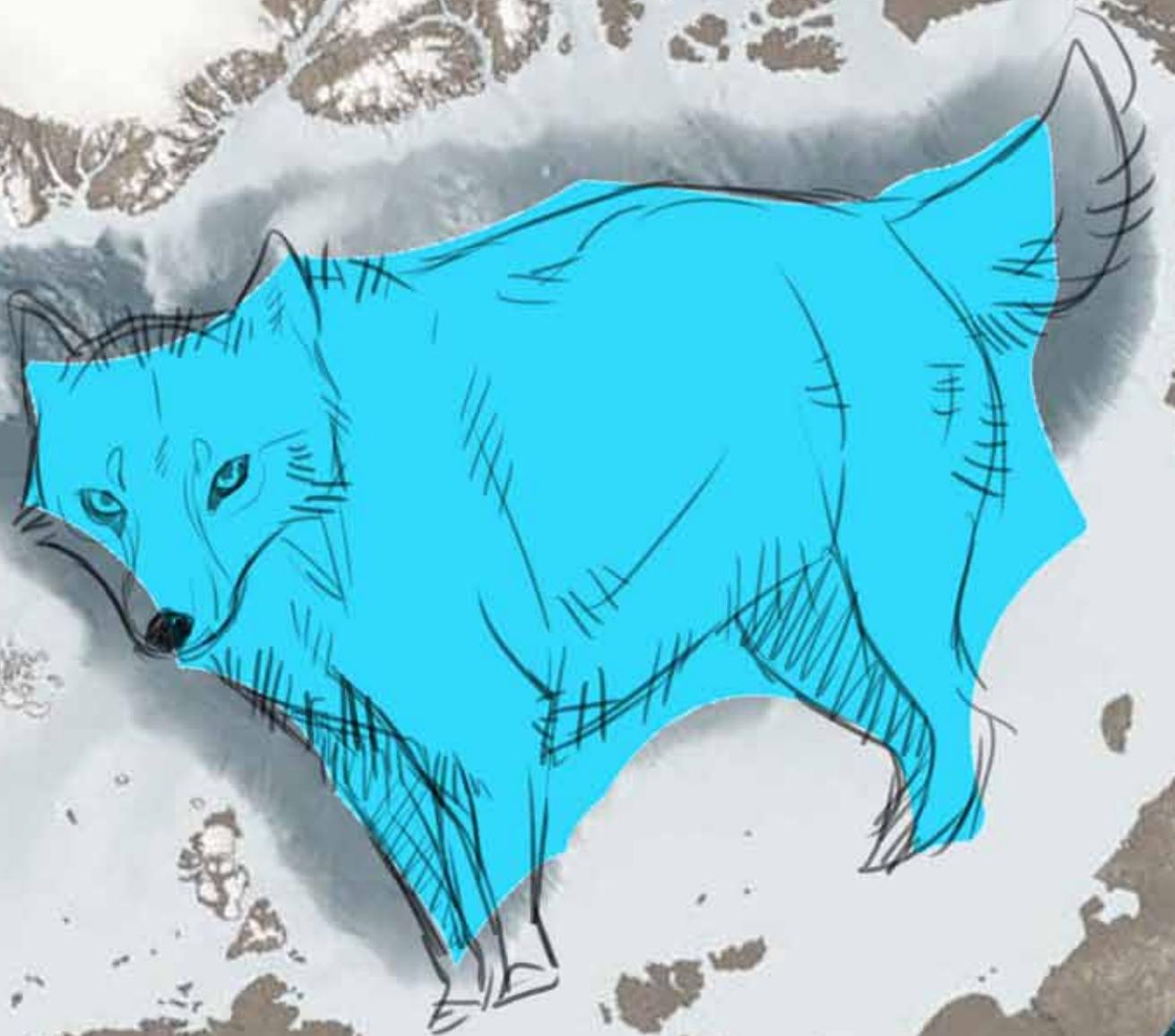


# global sanctuary



in the **Arctic**

# GLOBAL S

## The case for protecting the Arctic

If there is a wild frontier for climate change it is found at the Arctic Circle. Latitude 66.5° north of the Equator. The Arctic Circle is the line above which the sun can remain continuously above or below the horizon for 24 hours at the June or December solstice.

Since 1980, average surface temperature increases in the Arctic have been double the temperature rises recorded elsewhere in the world. The impacts of climate change are far reaching in an environment that is as fragile as it is beautiful. The impact most widely reported is the shrinking polar ice cap but the changes to the region are many and varied.

While contrarians, the intellectually challenged, and lobbyists for fossil fuel companies continue to argue about the reality of climate change the truth is that, at the Arctic, the argument has long since moved on. All eight nations with territory north of the Arctic Circle decided in 1996 that they had to respond collectively to the dramatic and rapidly changing situation. They formed the Arctic Council.

Alongside the member states - Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States - who have permanent members status are various other organisations. Six international bodies representing Arctic Indigenous Peoples have permanent participant status. Twelve other nations have permanent observer status on the Arctic Council: France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom, China, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and India. The UN is represented along with six other inter-governmental and inter-parliamentary organisations. Several NGOs, including WWF, have observer status.

### Changing interests

Traditionally the Arctic has played host to a variety of activities, from forestry and wood-based industries to the fishing and hunting of the indigenous peoples. As the polar ice retreats all manner of new opportunities are presenting themselves, including, maritime industry and shipping, oil and gas

exploration, mineral extraction, and tourism.

Each of the Arctic Council nations places different emphasis on these resources and opportunities. For the US the core interests may be characterized as freedom of the seas and security; for Canada, sovereignty; for Norway, regional stability, especially with Russia; for Russia, the economic potential in its Arctic hydrocarbon reserves.

Tourism has increased hugely in the past decade and a half. For example, overnight stays on Svalbard increased from 10,000 to 60,000 between 2000 and 2010.

Military interests are critical to the evolving situation. All Arctic Council members have been re-evaluating military capabilities as the melting ice changes the boundaries between nations. All the members have expressed the desire to maintain peaceful relations with their neighbours and avoid conflict but the Arctic Council has a prohibition on discussing military matters so there is no formal forum for Arctic Council members to resolve military

# ANCTUARY



*The Sermeq Kujalleq glacier discharges icebergs into the sea (I. Quaille, Ilulissat 2009)*

concerns. A sub-grouping (the Arctic Five: Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and United States) have been discussing military matters between themselves, which is potentially problematic. That said, Norway and Russia managed to settle a long-standing territorial dispute in 2009 so there appears to be a genuine desire to avoid conflict.

**“Like vultures watching from a safe distance as lions devour a corpse, the observer nations also have interests.”**

## Interested observers

Like vultures watching from a safe distance as lions devour a corpse, the observer nations also have interests. China is eyeing the possibility of new trans-polar shipping routes that would cut dramatically the cost and time to move goods around the world. For Japan the focus is on gaining access to rare earth metals,

as China currently controls 80% of known reserves.

The UK too has interests. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s report *Adapting to Change – UK Policy towards the Arctic*, published last year, lists UK interests as energy security, scientific research, food, national security, and risk management and insurance. Selling insurance to maritime companies and oil/gas/mineral prospectors is big business in the City of London, especially when the risks and the returns are astronomical and the environment is dangerous.

## What about the environment?

The Arctic Council and all the other players are very keen to stress their total commitment to protecting the Arctic environment, its ecosystems, its biodiversity, its pristine landscape and seascape. The UK is funding hundreds of scientific research studies on: permafrost, ocean acidification, arctic biodiversity, persistent organic pollutants, eco-system-

based management and more.

But beneath the piously knitted brows there is a gleam in every eye at the resources waiting to be plundered. Two words characterise the situation: uncertainty and hopefully

The key pressures are well understood: climate change; sea ice loss; fragility of Arctic ecosystems; invasive species; pollution and disruption of habitats; Arctic ocean acidification; threat to fish stocks and marine resources used by indigenous peoples; potential source of minerals including rare earth metals; the barely controlled thirst for oil and gas, driven by global demand.

What is uncertain is exactly what will happen in the Arctic or how quickly it will happen.

Everyone wants to advance their environmental credentials but everyone also wants to be in pole position, ready to tear into action as soon as the starting gun is fired.

Ill-prepared to respond to either the risks or the opportunities, all the players are making full use of the word *hopefully*.



Patrick Borbey, Chair of Senior Arctic Officials, is quoted as saying: “The key gaps that exist (with regard to sustainable shipping) don’t need to be addressed by governments alone; they can also be tackled in collaboration with people who are already operating – hopefully, operating safely – in the region.”

As another example, the Sustainable Development Working Group of the Arctic Council recently started a project on the prevention of oil spills.

Senior Arctic Official, and task force co-chair, Anton Vasilev said of this work, “we are so glad we do not have experience here yet. And indeed, we hope we never do gain experience. Nevertheless, the group managed to work out some particular recommendations, and we shall build on that during these talks. So in a way, this will be an intellectual continuation of the process that has taken part for years, if not decades,

in the Arctic Council. And so that will be a kind of pinnacle of all this kind of work, hopefully, if we manage to agree on something.”

The repeated use of the word ‘hopefully’ tells you all you need to know about the political desire to manage effectively any exploitation of the Arctic. The appeal by Borbey for help to come from ‘people

who are already operating’ makes clear that reliance will be placed on the commercial organisations exploiting or seeking to exploit the Arctic to evaluate risk and fund risk-management for themselves and then reassure the Arctic Council that everything is under control.

There is little indication as of now that the UK is any more committed to protecting the Arctic.

### Dependent on gas imports

55% of UK gas imports come from Norway. The Government accepts an International Energy Agency (IEA) report, the 450 Scenario, that even if oil consumption drops by 10% (from 87.4 million barrels per day in 2010 to 79.0 mb/day in 2035) there will need to be 40mb/d of new production capacity by 2035.

**“ Time is of the essence. Russia is trying to snatch over a third of the international waters of the Arctic. ”**

The figures for gas are worse, an increase in production of 20% by 2035, with unconventional production increasing as a percentage of total output. This suggests that the UK will abandon all environmental concerns as soon as the situation allows or requires, in spite of the risks posed by runaway climate change and environmental catastrophe. We appear to have as yet

learned very little from the disaster BP served up in the Gulf of Mexico.

### A cry from Deepwater Horizon

To recap: the rig was drilling in 1600m of water when the well head blew. It took 87 days to cap the well during which time 4.9 million barrels of oil spilled into an area of tens of thousands of square miles.

Transpose an exploratory rig to the Arctic where the ice is as deep and deeper and where, even with climate change, an ice cap covers most of the ocean for eight months of the year. In the event of a blow out the return of winter could mean that oil would be pouring across the sea bed and into the ocean for years before being brought under control. Scientific

research has established that the fauna of the Arctic grows slowly in the cold waters, that the entire region is suffering multiple impacts of climate change, that further burning of fossil fuel risks melting all the permafrost, releasing vast quantities of methane into the skies.

### A Global Sanctuary

It is in this context that Greenpeace launched its petition to persuade the nations of the world to sign up to protect the international waters of the Arctic by passing a resolution at the UN declaring the region off limits to oil, gas and mineral prospectors and commercial fisheries. They have also called for the Arctic nations to agree to a similar ban in the territorial waters within the Arctic Circle. To date 5.4 million people have signed the petition.

Time is of the essence. Russia is trying to snatch well over a third of the international waters of the Arctic. If it succeeds and drills for oil or gas



◀ left: Narwhals

◀ far left: Arctic fox

Front cover image delineates the extent and shape of the proposed arctic sanctuary in international waters, an area of 2.8 million square kilometres.

Polar bear ▼

near the pole, it will be drilling in up to 4,300 metres of water, well over twice the depth that derailed attempts to cap the Deepwater Horizon blow out.

The nations of the world, through the UN, must stand and be counted or, in reality, abandon any pretence that they are either trying to protect the Arctic or prevent runaway climate change.

### A role for Liberal Democrats

Liberal Democrats have a historic opportunity to show our environmental credentials by agreeing to incorporate into our party's national manifesto a commitment to support a global sanctuary in the Arctic if we form part of a coalition government next year's General Election. We can also ask our ministers to look into signing up now.

Our senior politicians may decide that trying to impose regulations on the Arctic Council nations, to limit

what they can or cannot do in their own territorial waters, is too difficult but, surely, the case for declaring a sanctuary in international waters is as clear and compelling as it is urgent.

Local authorities could play a part by signing the petition and incorporating the call for a global sanctuary into their rationale for environmental action at council level. Lib Dem councillors and activists



could be leading on this wherever we have a voice.

Given the forecasts of the IEA, we will only be able to save the Arctic, and ourselves, if we make further dramatic reductions in our use of fossil fuels. We are already committed to that. By pledging our party to support a global sanctuary we add further weight to the reasons for creating a low carbon future.

[www.savethearctic.org](http://www.savethearctic.org)  
[www.arctic-council.org](http://www.arctic-council.org)

'Adapting to Change - UK policy towards the Arctic' can be found at: [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)