



ARCTIC SANCTUARY

GLOBAL COMMONS,
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION
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GREENPEACE

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The Arctic sea ice is melting. Climate change resulting from human activity has removed at least 75% of the summer sea ice volume at rates never before experienced in human history. Soon, the Arctic Ocean will be like other oceans for much of the year: open water that is exposed to exploitation and environmental destruction.

This unique place is extraordinarily vulnerable, but of all the world's oceans, it is the least protected. Less than 1.5% of this area has any form of protected area status. In the high seas, the global commons, there is none.

The Arctic is thus the defining symbol of unchecked climate change. Its melting sea ice is a miserable product of human endeavour. With large parts once a de facto marine reserve protected by permanent sea ice, the Arctic Ocean has now become the crucial battleground in the fight for a sustainable future for our planet.

Arctic coastal states (Canada, Greenland, Norway, Russia and the US) are keen to lay claim to the valuable resources found beyond their national boundaries, and they have all submitted applications to extend their polar seabeds. Governments and industry see the opening of the Arctic as yet another business opportunity to extract more fossil fuels and fish, placing this unique region – and the entire world – at even greater risk.







Humanity now faces a stark choice. We can exploit the resources of one of the world's most fragile and precious oceans, or we can manage it responsibly – both for future generations, and for northern and Indigenous communities today, whose livelihoods rely upon a healthy ocean.

Part of the solution is simple: the creation of a sanctuary in the high seas region around the North Pole.

Arctic Region showing proposed Arctic Sanctuary



Key

-  Fisheries flashpoint: The waters around Svalbard are the gateway for the large-scale industrial fleet into the Arctic Ocean
-  Area of oil exploration
-  Oil tanker shipping route
-  Large-scale industrial fishing
-  Proposed Arctic Sanctuary
-  Average minimum sea-ice extent 1979-2000

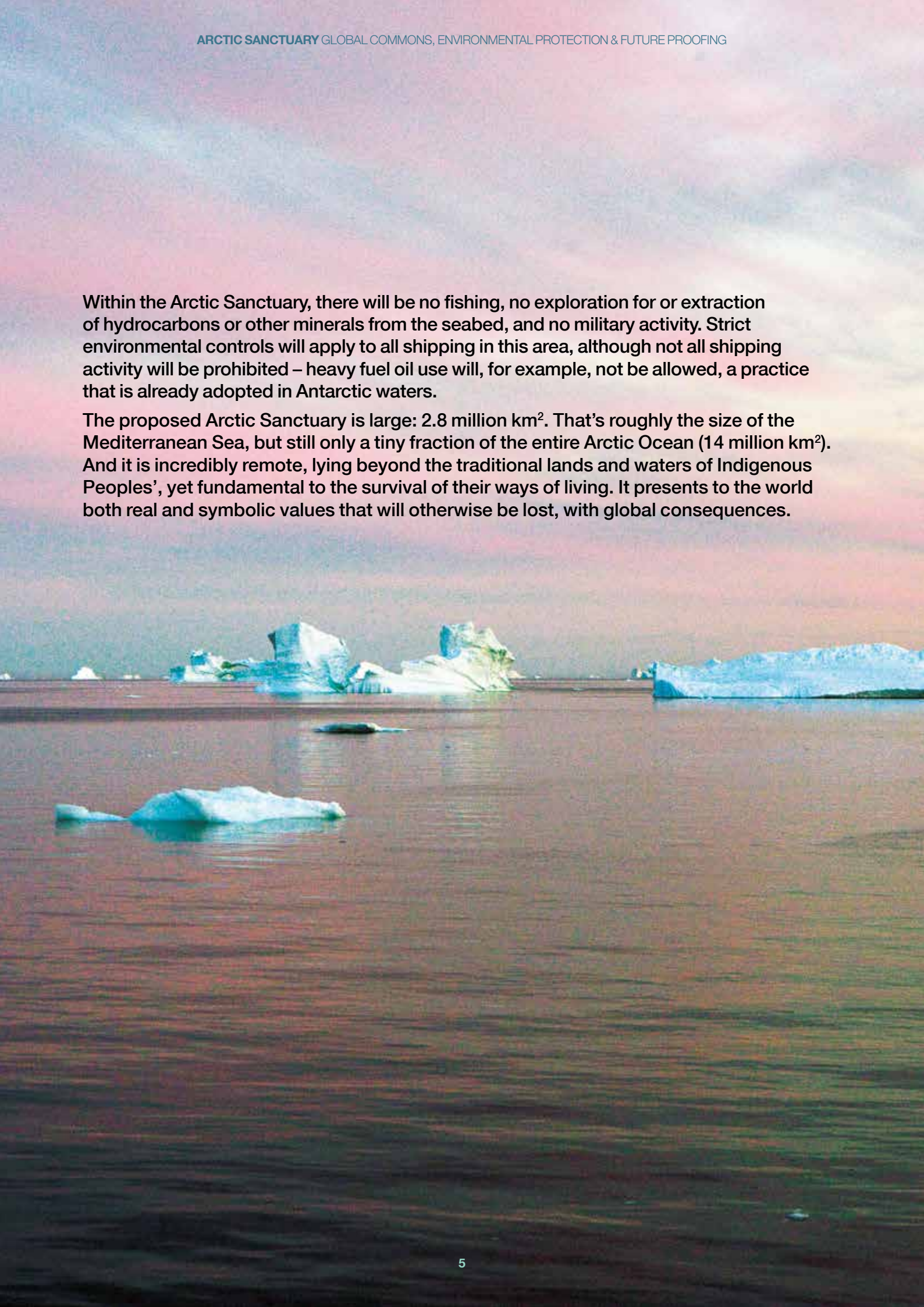
WHAT IS THE “ARCTIC SANCTUARY”?

The proposed Arctic Sanctuary is a highly protected area (or marine reserve) that will be off-limits to all extractive and destructive uses, covering the central Arctic Ocean beyond the 200 nautical mile limit of Arctic coastal states’ exclusive economic zones. This region is technically defined as “high seas” under the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and is universally recognised as the global commons, the shared responsibility of the entire international community.

Such a Sanctuary will fulfil some of the international commitments to establish a global network of marine protected areas and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) mandated network of “areas where extractive uses are excluded, and other significant human pressures are removed or minimised, to enable the integrity, structure and functioning of ecosystems to be maintained or recovered“ (CBD Decision VII/5 para 21 (b)).

Within the Arctic Sanctuary, there will be no fishing, no exploration for or extraction of hydrocarbons or other minerals from the seabed, and no military activity. Strict environmental controls will apply to all shipping in this area, although not all shipping activity will be prohibited – heavy fuel oil use will, for example, not be allowed, a practice that is already adopted in Antarctic waters.

The proposed Arctic Sanctuary is large: 2.8 million km². That's roughly the size of the Mediterranean Sea, but still only a tiny fraction of the entire Arctic Ocean (14 million km²). And it is incredibly remote, lying beyond the traditional lands and waters of Indigenous Peoples', yet fundamental to the survival of their ways of living. It presents to the world both real and symbolic values that will otherwise be lost, with global consequences.







WHY IS THE SANCTUARY NECESSARY?

In brief, a sanctuary is necessary because the Arctic Ocean is one of the planet's few remaining pristine marine regions and it is particularly vulnerable to human impacts. Arctic and sub-Arctic waters are among the most biologically productive in the world. For the first time in human history, permanent sea ice is, however, rapidly diminishing due to climate change, opening up the international waters of the central Arctic Ocean to oil exploration, to ship traffic, and to large-scale industrial fishing.

The central Arctic Ocean may seem like a harsh and desolate place, but it is in fact teeming with life that exists nowhere else on Earth. Bathed in sunlight 24 hours a day in the summer months, the Arctic is alive with ice-dependent mammals including polar bears, seals, walrus and whales, as well as vast numbers of seabirds. It is also home to huge shoals of fish, while sponge gardens and coldwater corals cover the ocean floor.

The presence of sea ice in the Arctic forms the foundation of a unique marine food chain. The smallest microorganisms and zooplankton survive specifically on the underside of the ice, and are consumed by Arctic cod. These are eaten by seals, which in turn are the staple food for polar bears. Seals also use the ice to give birth and nurse their young. Polar bears, the unique and iconic predator of the Arctic, roam the sea ice: it is their home.

All of this is now at risk from human activities such as oil drilling, industrial fishing, shipping and seabed mining.

THE ARCTIC SANCTUARY: A CRITICAL MARINE RESERVE

Science has recognised this high seas area of the central Arctic Ocean basin as a place of huge biological importance. A recent CBD Arctic Regional Workshop to Facilitate the Description of Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs) assessed submissions relating to the international waters of the Central Arctic Ocean, including the permanently ice-covered waters. The Arctic Sanctuary was found to comprehensively meet the scientific criteria to become an EBSA. This area, which contains some highly vulnerable ecosystems and species, is under threat. A strong need to limit human industrial activities and to increase further scientific research has been identified.

The establishment of large-scale marine reserves has been shown to result in long-lasting and often rapid increases in the abundance, diversity and productivity of marine organisms. Not only are they an important conservation and management tool, they are also effective in building resilience in ocean ecosystems against a rapidly changing climate and acidifying waters.

Unlike Antarctica, there is currently no single overarching treaty governing activities in the Arctic. With only a patchwork of differing rules and regulations in place (most of which are not legally binding) the Arctic Ocean is currently wide open to exploitation, bad practice and illegality.



Never before have we been able to choose how to manage vast areas of an ocean from scratch, with the full backing of science and international law. Without a specific governance regime, this extraordinary region is “open for business”. If we do nothing, it will become yet another victim of our rapacious appetite for resources, perhaps even raising tensions between those countries seeking to exploit them.

Fishing is but one example of the need for better rules. The high seas area is currently not subject to any regulations to control fishing. In 2012, more than 1 million km² of previously ice-covered area in the Arctic Ocean (larger than the Norwegian Sea) with fishable water depths became open water as the sea ice melted. Primary productivity in the Arctic Ocean is now thought to be much higher than previously estimated, and new transboundary fish stocks are identified almost every year. Several non-Arctic nations are already seeking new fishing grounds in the Arctic Ocean.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ESTABLISHING THE SANCTUARY?

It is not solely the five Arctic coastal states whose waters surround the high seas who are responsible for establishing the Sanctuary. The area in question is “beyond national jurisdiction”, which means it is part of the global commons and therefore the responsibility of everybody, no matter if their country lies on the other side of the world, or is even landlocked. The five Arctic coastal states, together with Arctic Council member states, would need to work with the international community to secure the Sanctuary, something that – until now – they have consistently failed to do.

A Sanctuary in this international space must be part of a wider comprehensive network of MPAs, which also include areas within the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of the five Arctic coastal states.

This network is the cornerstone of effective ecosystem based management, which is desperately needed and is clearly part of the Arctic Council’s mandate. However, despite almost 20 years work by scientists, it remains but a distant dream.



CREATING A SANCTUARY IN THE INTERNATIONAL WATERS OF THE ARCTIC

The rules of UNCLOS apply to these waters, giving the legal requirement for countries to cooperate to ensure the effective protection and management of life in these areas, including ice-covered waters. Political commitments have also been made by the international community to ensure marine protection. In 2010 the CBD set a target for a global network of MPAs (within and outside EEZs) covering at least 10% by 2020, and called for cooperation in the protection of marine biodiversity (CBD Decision X/29 para. 32). The process within the CBD to identify EBSAs, including in the Arctic Ocean, will add to the responsibility of governments to cooperate to take measures to protect those areas under threat, including the Central Arctic Ocean.

The legal and political, as well as environmental, basis to act is clearly there. Despite the black holes in Arctic governance there are a number of ways an Arctic Sanctuary can be created.

The simplest would be through a binding multilateral agreement. At any time it would be possible for Arctic states, in collaboration with the international community, to create a multilateral agreement to control extractive and military activity in the area of international waters beyond their EEZs. The Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement and the Agreement on Cooperation and Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic are recent examples of two regional treaties that have been concluded by members of the Arctic Council. They illustrate that with enough political will governments can cooperate to make binding agreements.



Another route to create what is, in effect, an internationally managed marine reserve in the central Arctic Ocean is through a new “Implementing Agreement” under UNCLOS. A process is currently underway at the UN General Assembly to decide on launching negotiations to address the serious gaps in the global ocean governance systems, such as specific rules for the protection of biodiversity in the high seas, beyond a general call to “protect and preserve the marine environment” (article 192). Greenpeace and other civil society organisations are seeking a new implementing agreement under UNCLOS to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction, including the establishment of marine reserves. However, a new UNCLOS implementing agreement is still some way off, and even if the green light is given to initiate the process which could lead to an agreement in 2015, it will be years before it is negotiated and ratified. This is time that the Arctic can ill afford.

There are many other sector-based governance instruments that cover the Arctic region, including Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) and the International Maritime Organisation, or geographical-based treaties like OSPAR. All of these have advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses. They are, however, far from a comprehensive solution to ensuring the establishment of a multi-sector marine protected area. A legally binding instrument dedicated to the protection of the central Arctic Ocean basin, the Arctic Sanctuary, is the most straightforward option.



CALL FOR ACTION

The Arctic Sanctuary is one of the most urgent issues of our time, and is reflected across media, culture and public opinion.

There is so much more to be gained from protecting it for future generations than exploiting it for a handful of corporations.

Greenpeace calls for immediate action to be taken to create a sanctuary in the Arctic, for the good of all life on Earth.



GREENPEACE

Greenpeace is an independent global campaigning organisation that acts to change attitudes and behaviour, to protect and conserve the environment and to promote peace.

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