



ARCTIC FISHERIES CONFLICT CASE STUDY

As climate change alters the Arctic's environment and geopolitical stability, WWF's new report offers a roadmap to conservation and security

In the coming years, the Arctic Region is likely to see growing fisheries conflict as climate change drives fish stocks to move in, out of, and within the region. That assessment is underpinned by our analysis of historical data, during 2000–2023, which shows fisheries conflict was most commonly caused by disputed access to fishing grounds, perceived or actual changes to the health of fish stocks, and broader changes in the marine environment.

Rising Conflict in the North

In the Arctic Ocean, sea ice extent is declining at a rate of almost 13% per decade. The oldest and thickest ice in the Arctic has declined by 95% over the past 30 years and, under current greenhouse gas emission trajectories, Arctic summers could see an ice-free ocean by 2040. The melting ice opens the Arctic Ocean, most of which is unexplored, to new oil claims, trade routes, and fishing grounds. The region is becoming a zone of contention for political and commercial control. The governance systems currently in place are ill-equipped to deal with these emerging threats.

Warming ocean waters are driving many fish stocks toward the poles in search of cooler waters, pushing them out of their historic ranges. Unlike other regions in the world where fisheries conflict has been driven by decreasing stocks, the Arctic will likely see conflict over increasing fish stocks and the arrival of new species. In Greenland and Iceland, threats to domestic fishing practices have unseated politicians and quelled political accords. Precious metal mining companies have become increasingly interested in Greenland's mineral wealth as the ice melts, but Greenlanders ousted a prime minister amidst the debate over whether mining and oil companies would damage traditional Inuit fishing trades. They also banned all foreign fishing so Greenland alone could benefit from the arrival of shrimp stock moving into their territory. Iceland halted its EU accession process to prevent mackerel from being governed as a common resource under EU law, which would reduce quotas available to Icelandic fishers.

The relatively recent (2012) arrival of a snow crab industry in Svalbard (northern Norway) had Norwegian media proclaiming a looming “crab war.” In fact, varying interpretations of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty have facilitated numerous fisheries conflicts in the Svalbard archipelago. Halfway between mainland Norway and the North Pole, the European Union and Russia continue to dispute Norway’s claims to control Svalbard’s surrounding waters. The Norwegian Coast Guard has detained European vessels that claim to be fishing legally. Snow crabs reside on the continental shelf and are thus managed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) regime for sedentary resources, the governance of which is more like oil than fishing. In 2019, the Supreme Court of Norway ruled in favor of Norway’s control and this may serve as a precedent for future oil and gas access.

Threats to Governance

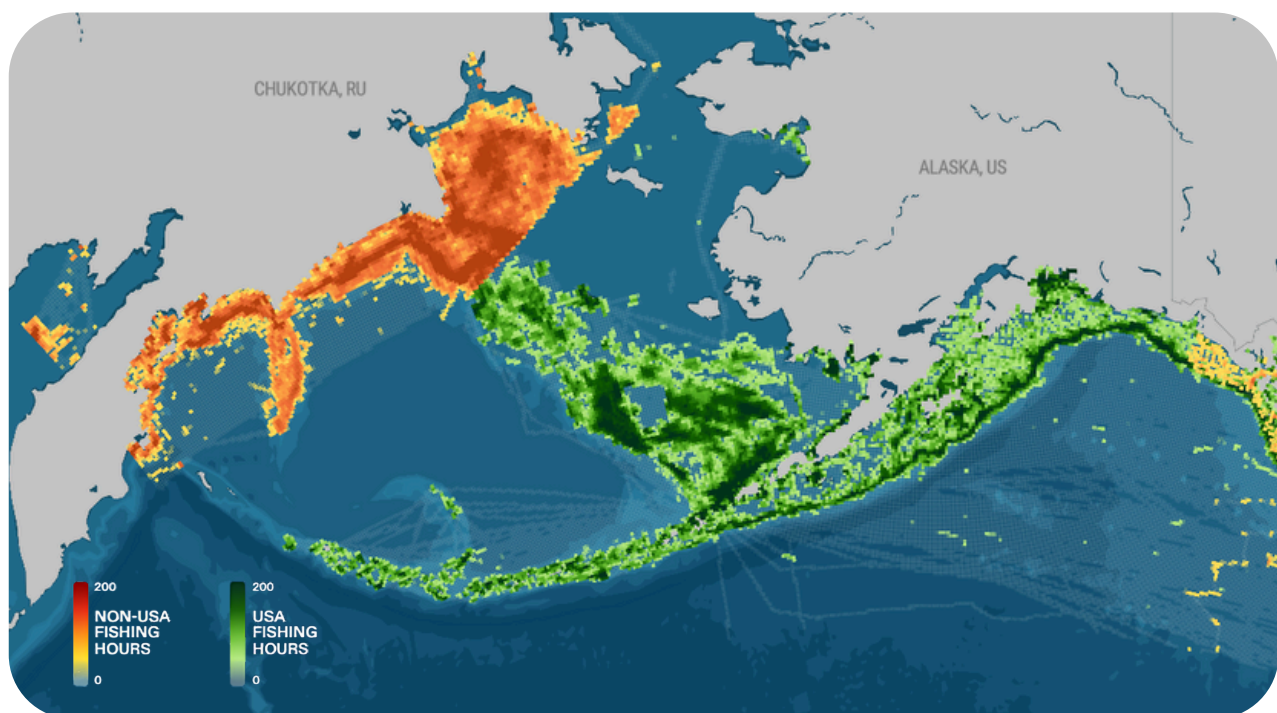
The anticipated poleward stock shifts motivated the ratification of the Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean, also known as the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (CAOFA), in June 2021. The 16-year agreement constraining industrial fishing in the Arctic High Seas will allow scientific exploration to understand the ecosystems that will emerge from below the ice and species that may migrate from the south to the central Arctic. This innovative, precautionary management accord was built upon the work of the Arctic Council, the intergovernmental group established in 1996 to coordinate cooperation in the Arctic. However, the strength of the Arctic Council (and CAOFA) has been threatened by rippled effects of geopolitical conflict elsewhere. Following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Arctic Council was suspended. Russia was acting as the Council chair at the time. The seven other member nations—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States—condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and paused their participation in all meetings. Three months later, a limited resumption of the forum’s work began, but without Russia’s participation. In May 2023, the chair was rotated to its Norwegian successor. In February 2024, Russia suspended payments to the Arctic Council.



Military Mobilization has Begun

Meanwhile, the region is seeing an increase in military exercises. Russia has re-established Soviet-era Arctic bases and, just weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine, Russian President Putin ordered his Northern Fleet to conduct a series of exercises to practice securing shipping routes in the Barents Sea. Suspicions of Russian espionage have unnerved Norwegian fishers in the forms of a beluga whale wearing a camera and intelligence-gathering vessels posing as fishing boats. In 2022, an undersea telecommunications cable that connected Svalbard to Norway's mainland was damaged. Norway blamed a Russian fishing trawler but could not prove their claim; the incident received considerable attention and exacerbated geopolitical tensions between the two nations.

The threat of cross-national conflict is also growing on the Bering Sea, particularly over the valuable pollock fishery that straddles the border between U.S. and Russian waters. On the U.S. side, a sustainable fisheries management plan has supported healthy stocks, whereas in the much smaller region controlled by Russia, overfishing is common. Russian, Chinese, and South Korean factory trawlers crowd the border to capture pollock as soon as they cross. While “fishing the line” is not illegal, some vessels attempt to illegally cross the border. In 2000, seven foreign fishing vessels, including some from Russia, were detained by the U.S. Coast Guard for illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in Alaskan waters. The U.S. Coast Guard and the Russian Federal Border Service collaborated to detain illegal vessels and discourage trespassing. Imagery from Global Fishing Watch suggests fishing vessels continue to crowd the boundary in pursuit of pollock.



USA and Non-USA Bering Sea fishing effort as indicated by total hours of AIS fishing activity in gridded 5 km² squares. Data comes from Global Fishing Watch.

As fish stocks continue to migrate northward, the United States is at risk of renewed foreign fishing efforts in its expansive Bering Sea waters. Some foreign fishing fleets may soon have naval protection. In 2021, the U.S. Coast Guard shadowed a Chinese fleet of warships through the Alaskan Aleutian Island chain. In 2022, the U.S. Coast Guard encountered Russian and Chinese naval vessels together in the Western Aleutians. The U.S. Navy was dispatched to follow a fleet of 11 Russian and Chinese naval warships through the Bering Sea in 2023. In 2024, four Chinese warships were spotted by the U.S. Coast Guard.

It Is Not Too Late

The Arctic has yet to experience high intensity fisheries conflict. It is not too late to prevent it, but holistic and forward-looking solutions are needed across governance and diplomacy, natural resource management and conservation, increased maritime domain awareness, and enforcement.

First, the Arctic faces a growing governance challenge. The Arctic Council has been the mediating source for Arctic disputes. It was established as a forum, not an international organization, and is not an instrument for legally-binding agreements. Without Russia's involvement, circumpolar governance and peace is threatened. Multilateral cooperation in the Arctic is critical for reducing illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and by extension, reducing the potential for conflict.

Cooperation over natural resource governance may provide a path forward. The primary factors that drive fisheries conflict—access to fishing grounds and ecosystem and fish stock health—can be used for good to facilitate cooperation. For example, Norway and Russia reached an [agreement on fishing quotas for 2023](#) in the Barents Sea during heightened tensions due to the war in Ukraine. Fisheries management negotiations can, in the right circumstances, enable peaceful collaboration and diplomacy. In the Arctic, this could include proactive protection of the marine environment, development of fisheries management programs that are informed of and adjust to ecosystem changes, and protection of food and job security in subsistence fishing communities. Negotiations in CAOFA, a legally binding instrument, present an opportunity. Monitoring and mitigation measures are currently in development; the proposed exploratory fishing should have independent review of the plans and data that result from them, timely and complete reporting, and independent international observers on-board.

Second, we must increase the pace of development for climate-smart fisheries solutions and innovative technologies for reducing the damage caused by fishing. The seafood industry must be a partner in this mission, and governments should incentivize fair labor practices, fair competition, and reduced subsidies. Relatedly, the role of blue foods in providing local food security should be mainstreamed into management practices, recognizing the key role fisheries play in providing nutrition to coastal communities throughout the Arctic.

Third, improving governance and management will not achieve lasting outcomes unless the policies are complied with, and therefore enforced. Greater maritime domain awareness (MDA), provided through monitoring, applications of observational systems or vessel tracking, data collection, and information sharing, are essential. For example, better MDA would immediately underscore vessel compliance (and lack thereof) with CAOFA's prohibition of commercial fishing.

Fourth, Arctic stakeholders need to adequately resource interventions that will further stability in this important domain. For example, in the U.S. context, one immediate action would be for Congress to fund the laws that are already on the books on IUU fishing, including the inter-agency work that is mandated by the Maritime SAFE Act, adopted in 2019.

Fifth, in light of the national security implications of IUU fishing, it will be important to enable capacity building resources to flow throughout governments. The U.S. military, in collaboration with international partners, should include countering IUU fishing and crime as one of its authorized mission sets, including expanding ship rider agreements for the U.S. Coast Guard. This would enable capacity building and cooperation in the Arctic and globally.

We must get it right in the Arctic. If we do not, over the next few years the consequences will be severe. The people who call the Arctic home will suffer, nature will be harmed at scale, and geopolitical tensions will rise. There is another path that includes deploying smart natural resource management tools, building collaborative governance, and deescalating competition over resources and territory at the top of the world.

Partner with Us

This is just the beginning. Over the next two years, we are expanding the data and research on fisheries conflicts, improving our predictive models, and using our findings to strengthen the global fight against illegal fishing, crimes at sea, and fisheries conflict.

Peaceful oceans are possible, and they are necessary. They are necessary for biodiversity. For healthy families. For preserving life and safety at sea. And for de-escalating and preventing conflicts.



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