

An Open Letter from International Scientists

The Arctic Ocean is encircled by five coastal states, but there is a significant portion of the central Arctic Ocean that lies outside the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of the Arctic rim nations. These international waters are not at present governed by any specific international fisheries agreements or regulations. Until recently, the region has been covered with sea ice throughout the year, creating a physical barrier to fisheries.

In recent summers, however, the loss of permanent sea ice has left open water in as much as 40% of these international waters. This region is no more remote from major fishing ports and fishing fleets than many areas of the world to which pelagic fleets travel already. A commercial fishery in the central Arctic Ocean is now possible and feasible.

The ability to fish is not the same as having the scientific information and management regimes needed for a well-managed fishery. The science community currently does not have sufficient biological information to understand the presence, abundance, structure, movements, and health of fish stocks and the role they play in the broader ecosystem of the central Arctic Ocean. In the absence of this scientific data and a robust management system, depletion of fishery resources and damage to other components of the ecosystem are likely to result if fisheries commence.

Although scientific research, observations, and modeling provide persuasive evidence of continued decrease of summer sea ice, far less is known about the present and future fisheries biology of these waters. Research is needed to develop a basic model of the central Arctic ecosystem, including estimates of abundance and distribution of potential target fish stocks and other key species in the food web.

Data and analysis also will be required to understand the effects of fishing removals on other components of the Arctic Ocean such as seals, whales and polar bears and the effect this may have on the peoples of the Arctic who rely on those resources for their subsistence and way of life. Time and effort will be required before scientific knowledge improves to the level required to support sound fisheries management in this remote region.

The central Arctic Ocean provides both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that exploratory fisheries, and subsequent claims of access to these international waters, could commence in the next few years. The opportunity is that the international community can take action now to protect these waters until we have the science and governance in place to ensure sustainable development of fisheries.

Now is the time for the international community to create a precautionary management system for central Arctic Ocean fisheries. Such a system should postpone fishing activity until such time as the biology and ecology of the region are understood sufficiently well to allow for setting scientifically sound catch levels. Such a system should also require that a robust management, monitoring, and enforcement regime be established before fishing is allowed. This system should be put in place before sea ice retreats further, before fishing begins and political pressure increases, and before precautionary management is no longer an option.

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We, the undersigned scientists, call on Arctic governments to take a lead in developing an international agreement to address fisheries in the central Arctic Ocean, based on sound scientific and precautionary principles, and starting with a catch level of zero as a reflection of the state of understanding of the fisheries ecology of the region.

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(The scientists who have signed this letter have done so in their personal capacities. Institutional affiliations are provided only for identification purposes, and do not imply any institutional position on Arctic Ocean fisheries.)

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