

Arctic saviour complex

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Greenpeace's new campaign to "save the Arctic" flies in the face of cooperation with the states and Indigenous peoples who already govern and occupy the region.

On midsummer's day, Greenpeace International launched a [high-profile, global advocacy campaign](#) to "save the Arctic" from the threat of industrial exploitation and pollution. The campaign's centrepiece is an "Arctic Scroll" with room for one million names—and signed on launch day by dozens of A-list celebrities—which Greenpeace intends to deposit on the sea floor at the North Pole. In subversive imitation of the Russian flag [planted there five years ago](#), a "Flag of the Future" will accompany the Arctic Scroll, which the "youth of the world" will design in a competition organized by the global Girl Guide movement. According to the [campaign website](#), over 500,000 people have since subscribed online to Greenpeace's petition.

This is clever marketing, but like so much about Greenpeace's campaign, it has the feel of something aimed at southerners who romanticize the Arctic as a pristine wilderness, as well as their own roles in keeping it that way. It would be illuminating to know how many of the one million people who eventually sign the Arctic Scroll actually call the Arctic home. For even beyond the marketing, Greenpeace gives the strong impression that it hasn't much considered whether Northerners would support its campaign—or that it cares to cooperate with them on it in any case.

Greenpeace and its fellow Arctic Scroll petitioners [make two related demands](#). First, they want the international community to create a "global sanctuary in the uninhabited area around the North Pole," where no industrial development at all would be permitted. Second, they want "a ban on offshore oil drilling and industrial fishing in the wider Arctic region." Each of these demands sets up potential conflicts with Arctic states and peoples, who stand to benefit from the development of the Arctic's resources.

For Greenpeace, the “uninhabited area around the North Pole” comprises the waters of the central Arctic Ocean that lie beyond the offshore limits of the five Arctic coastal states’ Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)—often called the “[Arctic donut hole](#).” It also includes the associated seabed, which Greenpeace describes as “international.” Greenpeace asserts that this part of the Arctic “belongs to all of us,” and that a global sanctuary would “secure it for all life on Earth” before any state or corporation can “get their hands on it.”

But according to the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea \(UNCLOS\)](#), only the waters of the Arctic donut hole are the common property of humanity. The Arctic coastal states can exercise exclusive and sovereign rights over the resources of the seabed wherever it represents an extension of their continental shelves. Currently, these states are in the process of defining their Arctic continental shelves in accordance with UNCLOS rules. Greenpeace characterizes this as “submitting their claims to the seabed, saying it’s their territory,” but in fact they’re merely discovering what already belongs to them under international law.

It’s less clear what Greenpeace means by “the wider Arctic region,” where it seeks a ban on commercial fishing and offshore oil drilling. Presumably, it must include some part of the EEZs of the Arctic coastal states—or even portions of their territorial or internal waters and seabed, over which they’re completely sovereign. [A separate plan for marine protected areas](#) that Greenpeace concurrently presented to the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development illustrates just how much of the Arctic Greenpeace seems to have in mind.

At Rio+20, Greenpeace proposed a moratorium on all industrial activity over the entire area of the Arctic Ocean historically covered by sea ice. Its accompanying map of average minimum sea ice from 1979 to 2000, while somewhat imprecise, shows that Greenpeace envisions a blanket moratorium—on commercial fishing, oil exploration and perhaps any other form of industry—applying from the central Arctic Ocean to well within the EEZs or territorial and internal waters of all five arctic coastal states. Canada, with its historically ice-bound Arctic Archipelago, would have a particularly large sovereign area under moratorium.

Unlike a “global sanctuary” at the centre of the Arctic Ocean, which would conflict chiefly with the economic rights of the Arctic coastal states, this broader moratorium would encompass waters and seabed over which Arctic Indigenous peoples also have rights—including the [right to use, develop and control](#) Arctic

resources as the traditional owners and stewards of Arctic lands and waters. The Inuit, for example, [have made it quite clear](#) that they believe responsible resource development can make a durable contribution to the wellbeing of their people—and that they expect its financial benefits to flow to them first.

This includes benefits from commercial fishing and oil exploration. Under the [Nunavut Land Claims Agreement](#), the Inuit of Nunavut have preferential access to commercial fishing quota in the waters of Canada’s EEZ adjacent to Nunavut. Far from wishing to ban the industry, the Inuit have [lobbied hard for a fair share of quota](#), and they’ve [created fishing companies](#) to harvest it. They also have special rights to financial and economic benefits from resource development within Canadian territorial and internal waters in Nunavut. These waters include part of the Sverdrup Basin, which is [known to contain significant deposits](#) of oil and gas. To the west of Nunavut, the Inuvialuit of the Northwest Territories [cautiously welcome possible offshore oil exploration](#) in the Beaufort Sea, while remaining vigilant about its potential environmental costs. To the east, the Inuit of Greenland [positively court it](#).

So why does Greenpeace call for such sweeping countermeasures? As it points out, the “wider Arctic region” [has until recently been protected](#) from any unwelcome industrial activity by a shield of ice. In fact, it has yet to be fished or explored for oil in any significant sense, let alone overfished or polluted by oil spills or drilling blowouts. Industrial development in the Arctic has the potential to benefit Arctic states and peoples, as well as to harm the Arctic environment. But Greenpeace has decided that the threat of harm outweighs the promise of benefit.

There is certainly real cause for concern. Overfishing is a tremendous problem in all the world’s seas, and there’s no reason the Arctic Ocean should be an exception. The Atlantic cod stock in the Barents Sea [has been overfished for years](#), for example. Recently, Russian and Portuguese trawlers have [exploited a jurisdictional dispute](#) to [conduct unreported fishing](#) in the waters around Norway’s Svalbard archipelago, just outside Greenpeace’s historical minimum sea-ice margin. The Norwegian coast guard has even seized the same Portuguese trawler there [three times since 2009](#).

On the other side of the Arctic, the USA has [all but given official permission](#) to Royal Dutch Shell to drill exploratory oil wells this summer in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas north of Alaska, and [Canada has auctioned off](#) new offshore exploration rights in its portion of the Beaufort as well. Again, this is just

outside the historical minimum sea-ice margin, and Greenpeace is far from alone in worrying that Shell and other oil companies lack the capacity to clean up a spill or blowout there.

In their trademark confrontational style, Greenpeace activists [have made several attempts to obstruct](#) Shell's drilling preparations physically, and the launch of their "Save the Arctic" campaign featured arrests outside Shell headquarters in The Hague. In 2011, Greenpeace activists [similarly attempted to interdict](#) oil exploration off the west coast of Greenland by UK-based Cairn Energy. Cairn was drilling in waters nearly always ice-free in summer, suggesting that Greenpeace's self-proclaimed "line in the ice" is somewhat notional. It seems that, for Greenpeace, there should be a moratorium on commercial fishing and offshore oil drilling anywhere plausibly within the Arctic, historically ice-covered or not.

But even an organization as resourceful and influential as Greenpeace cannot blockade every fishing trawler or drilling platform in its proscribed zone. Rather, its first order of business is to convince the UN General Assembly to pass a resolution in favour of its moratorium proposal. Greenpeace intends this resolution to motivate subsequent negotiations for a "new, legally binding, comprehensive agreement for the protection of the Arctic," which would include the global sanctuary in the central Arctic Ocean. As for the current international Arctic governance regime—principally UNCLOS and the Arctic Council—Greenpeace believes it to be inadequate, and potentially even malign. For Greenpeace, "it remains to be seen whether the Arctic Council will be the protector of the Arctic or its exploiter."

Greenpeace's suspicions help to explain why [it has applied for observer status](#) to monitor the Arctic Council's proceedings. However, the Arctic Council is just as suspicious of Greenpeace, and it has adopted [criteria for admitting observers](#) that seem to preclude the possibility that Greenpeace could now become one. Observers should, among other things, "recognize Arctic States' sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the Arctic," as well as "recognize that an extensive legal framework applies to the Arctic Ocean including, notably, the Law of the Sea, and that this framework provides a solid foundation for responsible management of this ocean." They should also "respect the interests of Arctic Indigenous peoples."

Now, it's not necessary to be an observer at the Arctic Council in order to participate constructively in Arctic affairs, and there's room for considered

disagreement about how best to govern the Arctic. But Greenpeace's damn-the-torpedoes approach seems to betray an insensitivity to constructive cooperation with Northerners on these issues—not just with the Arctic Council and its member states, but also with the Indigenous peoples who are permanent participants on the Arctic Council and who call the Arctic home. Nothing demonstrates this better than Greenpeace's call for an Arctic version of the [Antarctic Treaty System \(ATS\)](#), an international regime purpose-built for a continent that's home to no one.

With no previous history of habitation, colonization, or exploitation, and only the barest of grounds for sovereign claims, Antarctica exemplifies the international legal principle of the “common heritage of humanity.” On the basis of this principle, the ATS puts all claims on Antarctica into abeyance, and it bans resource development there to help preserve the Antarctic environment for science. In this way, Antarctica is like the Moon and outer space, which are also part of humanity's common heritage, and which have similar treaties putting them beyond the exclusive possession and use of any state or corporation. The Arctic's Indigenous peoples might frown upon the idea that their homeland should be legally much the same as extraterrestrial space, but Greenpeace thinks that the ATS makes an excellent model for the new regime it's promoting.

All the same, common heritage doesn't preclude common use. Industrial development may be permitted in the commons, with the caveat that the international community should cooperate to regulate it for the benefit of all. For example, fishing in Antarctic waters is regulated under the ATS's [Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources](#). Whether and to what extent fishing should be allowed in the high seas at the centre of the Arctic Ocean—the only part of the Arctic that qualifies as humanity's common heritage—[are still open questions](#). But it doesn't immediately follow from its international status that it should be put off limits to everyone.

Greenpeace is no stranger to these issues and distinctions. [It was instrumental](#) in resisting proposals for an [Antarctic mining convention](#), and in bringing about the ATS ban on mining instead. But it's one thing to take an uncompromising stand against industrial development where no one lives, and quite another to take the same stand in someone's backyard. The Arctic isn't the common heritage of all. It's the particular heritage of some—its Indigenous peoples and sovereign states, whose histories of use and occupancy in the Arctic stretch back centuries.

These states and peoples often disagree strongly about how to manage Arctic resources sustainably. In general, however, neither is wholly against industrial development in the Arctic, and both wish to see the Arctic environment protected. In 2009, for example, the [USA imposed a moratorium](#) on commercial fishing in its Arctic EEZ until the marine environment there is better understood. [Canada took similar action](#) in part of its Arctic EEZ in 2011. Why not build on these efforts rather than try to replace them with something completely new and imposed from outside?

For Greenpeace, the answer is clear. It proudly proclaims that “a ban on offshore oil drilling and unsustainable fishing would be a huge victory against the forces ranged against this precious region and the four million people who live there.” But with its uncompromising and uncooperative approach, it seems to be among the vanguard of those very forces that it seeks to fight.

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