

Major fishing nations agree Arctic moratorium

5 hours ago



The world's major fishing nations have agreed a moratorium on commercial fishing in the Arctic Ocean, before it has even become established.

Much of the Arctic was once permanently frozen but global warming means its waters are becoming more accessible.

The deal is expected to last for 16 years while research is carried out into the existing marine ecosystem.

The moratorium was agreed by Canada, Russia, China, the US, the EU, Japan, Iceland, Denmark and South Korea.

It covers an area of about 2.8m sq km (1m sq miles) - roughly the size of the Mediterranean Sea. No commercial fisheries exist in Arctic waters yet.

"This is one of the rare times when a group of governments actually solved a problem before it happened," said David Balton, US ambassador for oceans and fisheries.

"In the future if fish stocks are plentiful enough to support a commercial fishery there, they will be part of the management system and presumably their vessels will have the opportunity to fish for those stocks."

Conservationists applauded the deal.

Trevor Taylor, of the Canadian group Oceans North, said fish and marine mammals that many Arctic communities relied upon would now be protected.



Declining summer sea ice could open the Arctic Ocean to commercial fishing.

NASA/Kathryn Hansen/Flickr [CC BY 2.0](#)

Nations agree to ban fishing in Arctic Ocean for at least 16 years

By [Hannah Hoag](#) Dec. 1, 2017, 1:30 PM

Nine nations and the European Union have reached a deal to place the central Arctic Ocean (CAO) off-limits to commercial fishers for at least the next 16 years. The pact, announced yesterday, will give scientists time to understand the region's marine ecology—and the potential impacts of climate change—before fishing becomes widespread.

"There is no other high seas area where we've decided to do the science first," says Scott Highleyman, vice president of conservation policy and programs at the Ocean Conservancy in Washington, D.C., who also served on the U.S. delegation to the negotiations. "It's a great example of putting the precautionary principle into action."

The deal to protect 2.8 million square kilometers of international waters in the Arctic was reached after six meetings spread over 2 years. It includes not just nations with coastal claims in the Arctic, but nations such as China, Japan, and South Korea with fishing fleets interested in operating in the region.

[SIGN UP FOR OUR DAILY NEWSLETTER](#)

Get more great content like this delivered right to you!

Thus far, thick ice and uncertain fish stocks have kept commercial fishing vessels out of the CAO, but the region is becoming increasingly accessible because of rapid loss of summer sea ice. In recent summers, as much as 40% of the CAO has been open water, mostly north of Alaska and Russia, over the Chukchi Plateau.

As the summer sea ice becomes thinner and its edge retreats northward, more sunlight is penetrating the water, increasing production of plankton, the base of the Arctic food web. These sun-fed plankton are gobbled up by Arctic cod, which in turn are hunted by animals higher up the food chain, including seals, polar bears, and humans. Some parts of the Arctic Ocean's adjacent seas, such as the Barents Sea (off the northern coasts of Russia and Norway), saw steep increases in primary production in 2016, approaching 35% above the 2003–15 average.

Under international law, these high seas are open to anyone. In the absence of an agreement, fishing there would not be illegal, but it would be unregulated—and some researchers, environmental groups, and policymakers fear it could harm the fragile and rapidly changing marine ecosystem. In the late 1980s, fishing trawlers from Japan, China, and elsewhere crowded the international waters in the Bering Strait between Russia and the United States and removed millions of tons of pollock. By the early 1990s, the pollock population had crashed. It has still not recovered.

In 2012, approximately 2000 scientists called for a fishing moratorium in the CAO to prevent a similar catastrophe. Their efforts were a success: By 2015, Canada, Denmark (representing Greenland), Norway, Russia, and the United States—the nations with Arctic coastlines—vowed to bar their own fishing vessels from the area.

But that left the Arctic open to large global fishing fleets. Delegations from Japan, China, South Korea, Iceland, and the European Union joined discussion later that year to negotiate a new agreement. In December 2016, before he left office, then-President Barack Obama and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau affirmed their commitment to a legally binding agreement to prevent unregulated fishing in the CAO.

“The delegations saw the wisdom in waiting [to start commercial fishing] until there was enough science and management in place,” says Ambassador David Balton of the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C., who has chaired the negotiations since 2015. The deal will stand for 16 years and be automatically renewed every 5 years, unless a country objects or until science-based fisheries quota and rules are put in place.

In addition to closing the area to fishing, the delegations have agreed to a joint program of scientific research and monitoring to identify species, their abundance, existing predator-prey relationships, and the pressures they face, including climate change.

For now, accessing the CAO to do research requires significant icebreaking capacity, says Peter Harrison, an Arctic policy and fisheries expert at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, and former deputy minister of Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans. Whereas the United States and Canada have struggled to maintain and grow their icebreaking fleet, other signatories, including China, have that capacity.

Harrison argues for the creation of a new multinational science organization focused on the CAO. It would determine the science priorities, share and analyze the data collected, and provide advice on the state of the CAO fish stocks. “If you say commercial fishing will not take place until there is sufficient science, going forward, the science will play a very significant role,” he says.

Posted in: [OceanographyPolicy](#)

doi:10.1126/science.aar6437



Hannah Hoag

Hannah Hoag is a science writer based in Toronto, Canada.

[Email Hannah](#) [Twitter](#)