



Arctic

Global Arctic Programme

A global response to a global challenge



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Researchers studied supraglacial lakes on an expedition to Greenland's ice sheet, with support from WWF.

Who we are

Our vision is that effective international stewardship shields the Arctic from the worst effects of rapid change by promoting healthy living systems to the benefit of local peoples and all humanity. We are the coordinators of a focused international effort by WWF to achieve that vision. WWF operates in more than 40 countries, and has a staff of more than 5,400.

We have operated a programme focused on the circumpolar world since 1992. We have an office in every Arctic country except Iceland. Our international office, headquartered in Canada and with an office in Oslo, coordinates our Arctic work. WWF is the only circumpolar environmental NGO present at the Arctic Council, where we hold observer status. This gives us access to discussions between the Arctic states and the Indigenous peoples of the region.



Why we care

Because of its low population density, the Arctic has been a place relatively untouched by industrial development. That is now changing. The Arctic is considered by the US Geological Survey to contain almost 20 percent of the world's remaining undiscovered oil and gas. Diamonds are mined there, and gold, and many other minerals. The Arctic summer sea ice is predicted to be gone within a generation. Without that protective shell of ice, the Arctic is exposed to new influences. Shipping companies are already building tankers to operate in the region, and there is much discussion about the potential of using Arctic routes to shave time and distance off international shipping. The whole marine ecosystem is in flux with changing temperatures in the Arctic, which could mean commercial fishing further north.

Underlying the increasing use of the Arctic is the influence of climate change on the region. The Arctic is warming at about twice the rate

of the global average. This will bring tremendous challenges to species, ecosystems, and peoples who have evolved to take advantage of the Arctic's unique conditions. Most at risk are the ice-adapted animals: polar bears, some species of seal, walrus, and some whale species are the most obvious. Less obvious are a whole host of smaller organisms that feed the Arctic food web. Even on land, the effects of warming are being felt. Several wild caribou herds are shrinking, a decline blamed partly on changing weather conditions. Reindeer herders across Eurasia also report problems brought on by warming.

While many impacts of warming are being felt in the Arctic, a warming arctic also has global impacts. The loss of reflective snow and ice in the Arctic means the whole world gets warmer, and gases such as methane currently frozen into permafrost also have the potential to further increase global temperatures.

GLOBAL FOCUS

THE GAP WORKS
AROUND THE POLE, WITH
OFFICES IN 7 ARCTIC
COUNTRIES.

WHAT WE ARE DOING

The enormous challenges of the changing Arctic require a broad array of responses from the local to the global. WWF is active at all of these levels.

ARCTIC SPECIES

We have identified four priorities for our species work: caribou/reindeer; polar bears; walruses; and ice-adapted whales such as narwhal and bowhead. We have chosen those species because of their importance to ecosystems and people, and because of the level of threat they face. WWF is working to protect critical habitat including important movement corridors, and denning habitat, and to prevent or remove direct threats from industrial activity such as oil and gas development, and arctic shipping. In the case of polar bears, we are also providing people with training and tools to help prevent conflicts between bears and people.

ARCTIC MARINE GOVERNANCE

This is the more global aspect of our work – no matter how good regulations or management systems may be in any one Arctic jurisdiction or sector, that good work can be undone by a neighbouring jurisdiction or another sector. WWF has commissioned reports showing where the gaps in governance are, and suggesting ways to fix those gaps. We continue to work with Arctic states and Indigenous peoples to support them in their efforts to improve Arctic governance.

CLIMATE RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATION

The big picture is clear: the Arctic is warming, and fast. The smaller picture is harder to understand. What processes are driving the changes, and what effect will they have at a regional or community level? WWF is supporting research into both of these areas, both by our expert staff, and by other acknowledged international experts in the field. By communicating this improved knowledge to local and global audiences, we help local people make decisions about how to manage changing ecosystems, and we supply global decision-makers with information they need to consider in international climate negotiations.



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RESPONSIBLE INDUSTRY

We know the Arctic cannot be a nature theme-park. The people who live there need economic opportunities. We work with local people, and with developers from outside the region to try to ensure that development can take place at a pace and on a scale that is supportable by the fragile and changing Arctic ecosystems. This work includes mapping which natural areas are the most important to ecosystems. This information can help industries work around those areas, such as choosing different shipping routes, or in some places helping make the case for areas too naturally valuable to be threatened by industrial accidents.

CONSERVATION BLUEPRINT

As the Arctic changes, valued areas change too. The old established parks may no longer be havens for species they were designed to protect, and so the approach to conservation needs to adapt. WWF is leading international research and working with local people to identify areas that are most valuable in an ecological and social sense, then to establish the vulnerability of those areas to anticipated climate change. The final product will be a circumpolar map together with recommendations that can be used by local peoples and Arctic states to help plan and manage areas so that they can best withstand climate change.



Why we are here.

We are creating solutions to the most serious conservation challenges facing our planet, helping people and nature thrive.

panda.org

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