

Proceedings of the Arctic Marine Conservation Dialogue

– A virtual forum for expert exchange –

25th & 26th November 2020

1 Introduction and overview

On 25 and 26 November 2020, over 40 international experts with research and governance backgrounds on marine Arctic conservation and its governance frameworks met virtually and exchanged on numerous aspects of Arctic marine conservation.¹

Over the course of two afternoons, the participants engaged in plenary discussions and three moderated working groups on specific issues. In the opening plenary, the uniqueness and fragility of Arctic marine ecosystems and their biodiversity were highlighted as well as the increasing pressures and threats they are exposed to due to growing human activities as a consequence of the effects of climate change on the Arctic. In addition, participants stressed that an intact and healthy Arctic environment, including marine biodiversity as well as the ice cover of the Central Arctic Ocean, is crucial to buffer the global effects of climate change. The plenary also gave space to underline the importance of standardised data collection and management to allow for the monitoring of biodiversity and the identification of status and trends, building the foundation for policies and measures to protect the Arctic's marine biodiversity. Further, participants stressed the importance of sharing the available knowledge and connecting with a range of rights holders and stakeholders. Against this backdrop, working groups then explored three specific topics.

2 Exchanges and results from the working groups

The three working groups focused on (i) area-based management under climate change, (ii) sustainable fisheries in the Arctic, and (iii) oil, gas and biodiversity protection. On the first day, inputs from the participants were gathered on the status quo and challenges concerning these issues, before turning towards potential solutions and exploring necessary next steps to implement those on the second day.

2.1 Group 1: Area-based management under climate change

In the working group discussion, participants noted that consideration of climate change is currently lacking in area-based management in the Arctic and that globally, only a few tangible approaches and best-practice examples exist. Discussants perceived measures to lag behind the fast developments and changes which can be observed in the Arctic as a result of climate change. Good examples exist in the Arctic with regards to community-led conservation approaches which might provide inspiration for other regions on how to involve rights holders and local communities in marine conservation.

Participants stressed that while the Arctic states have an implicit common vision for marine conservation and sustainable use in the region, no clear targets and commitments exist in the region and Arctic states implement highly diverse approaches and strategies to marine conservation. Great interest in future economic development in the region was noted to be one reason for slow and insufficient developments in marine Arctic conservation.

Further identified challenges related to power imbalances between the local, regional, national and global level, data deficiency, and a lack of dynamic governance structures which could facilitate adaptive area-based management in the region.

¹ The Dialogue was organised by Ecologic Institute on behalf of the German Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) and implemented with the support of experts from the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) and WWF. The funding was provided by the German Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) through BfN.

The discussions on the approaches to address the identified challenges highlighted the importance of allowing for flexible approaches to area-based management which in turn allow different needs to be addressed. Promising examples included protection measures such as the Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean as well as cross-sectoral approaches such as Marine Spatial Planning.

The group identified the need to create governance structures which can accommodate adaptive management. Such governance structures should include monitoring and conservation mechanisms at Arctic scale with a strong focus on data exchange which could promote implementation of conservation measures at the national level.

Moreover, it was stressed that tools for dynamic management and monitoring processes need to be set up with the aim to further refine the planning of area-based conservation measures under climate change. The conservation measures should be based on a whole-Arctic ocean approach and multi-stakeholder engagement, in particular including local communities and Indigenous Peoples. MPAs and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs), Marine Spatial Planning as well as best practice examples should be considered when defining suitable conservation measures. The Arc-Net initiative of WWF was presented as such an approach to systematic and cooperative conservation planning for the Arctic.

2.2 Group 2: Sustainable fisheries in the Arctic

A major pillar of the sustainable fisheries working group discussions was the importance of the availability of fisheries data and adequate models to enable sustainable fisheries management. Current data and models suggest that as the Arctic warms, some commercial fish species are shifting north and populations are changing. However, gaps and uncertainties linked to species data need to be filled to adequately model future scenarios, especially as Arctic ice continues to melt. Current models leave too much room for speculation and might even make a case for harmful exploitative activities. Discussants emphasised the need for less destructive sampling techniques to avoid destroying valuable habitats when gathering data, especially as many Arctic habitats have relatively long recovery times.

In making the case for sustainable fishing, the question came up as to who can fish what and where. The transboundary nature of the Arctic Ocean, as well as the migrating characteristics of fish species, demand a unified approach whilst also making coordinated political action challenging.

The 2018 International Agreement to Prevent Unregulated Fishing in the High Seas of the Central Arctic Ocean places a moratorium on commercial fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean for 16 years until adequate scientific information is available to support sustainable management, but it has not yet been decided what will happen afterwards. The discussants identified challenges to the scientific goals of the agreement, including logistical challenges of limited research boats and budgets, as well as the difficulty of setting scientific baselines in such a rapidly warming Arctic. To ensure the Agreement has impact, the working group emphasised the importance of establishing an effective scientific body, incorporating Indigenous voices and knowledge, especially in light of future recognition of Indigenous ownership of new fishing grounds becoming accessible due to receding sea ice.

The challenges linked to data and models could be relieved somewhat by wider application of remote monitoring techniques as well as the compilation and exchange of existing data between Arctic states. Potential solutions discussed in terms of sustainable fishing measures included permanent or temporal closure of fisheries based on the fishing footprint, a biomass cap on fisheries as well as community-based management. In this regard the importance of empowering the Indigenous communities and applying the precautionary principle was highlighted. Currently, the Arctic states rely on the natural limitations set by the ice to govern the Arctic Ocean but this “handy” option will disappear as the region’s climate warms. While the Central Arctic Ocean fishing moratorium buys the region time, discussants agreed that this time must not be wasted, and that political as well as scientific ambitions have to be pursued to enable sustainable fisheries in the Arctic.

2.3 Group 3: Oil, gas and biodiversity protection

The group looked at the relationship between oil and gas extraction and the protection of biodiversity. It built on an overview of how the relationship between marine biodiversity and oil and gas industry is evolving in each country, and an assessment of the institutional and governance set up. On the second day the group looked at how balance can be maintained and enhanced in the future, informed by the status quo and challenges.

Both status quo and challenges were grouped in five clusters: economy, (infra-) structure, institutions and processes, dynamics and gaps. Economically, the oil and gas sector is volatile due to heavy capital investment, fluctuation of commodity prices, including in the present COVID-19 situation, and impact of government subsidies. It also competes with other more sustainable economic activities (such as fisheries, tourism or public infrastructure) and suffers from political attraction and influence, which is often disconnected from business reality. A push for transition to non-fossil fuels, issues of insurance and financing of clean-up of legacy pollution are additional pressures for the sector. Infrastructure is considered important, both in terms of its impacts on biodiversity (particularly offshore), but also with its potential to serve combined purposes, for industry and livelihoods; decommissioning and creation of stranded assets are a challenge.

Institutions, rules (both binding and voluntary) and processes for regulating the oil and gas industry's environmental performance are in place but nationally specific. There is limited appetite for international harmonisation, assessments and regulation. Furthermore, a dialogue between the oil and gas sector and the conservation community is absent. Climate change is having a huge impact on the dynamics of the relationship – on the one hand opening the boundary for development (such as marginal ice zone), and on the other hand putting pressure on marine biodiversity conservation, endangering infrastructure and increasing risks of emergency situations. There are limits of knowledge (including due to data gaps and data sharing), but also in responding to accidents (both due to competencies and other governance limitations and weather/climatic challenges).

When discussing the solutions, international governance for the Arctic marine environment, e.g. within the context of the Arctic Council, the International Maritime Organization (IMO), ongoing discussion at the United Nations for an international agreement on marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction (UN BBNJ process) and other global and regional frameworks, came out very strongly, highlighting the gaps and complex relationships. There was support for improving the rule base, through binding legal frameworks, focusing on preventive regulations and enhancing of international cooperation.

Designation and subsequent effective management of Arctic MPAs would help address a number of the challenges identified. Better sharing of knowledge, data, maps and tools could enhance conservation planning and response to emergencies. Enhancing corporate responsibility has a role in addressing the inherent conflict between extraction and conservation.

The group identified a number of potential concrete next steps: 1) further enhancement of the existing legal framework, 2) increasing dialogue and cooperation, e.g. with the oil and gas industry and with coast guards, 3) using the valuation of biodiversity services in the economic dialogue, 4) enhancing the use of maps and data collection and sharing. Dialogue with Indigenous communities and reflection of their knowledge was considered central for moving forward. Also, an opportunity to influence the upcoming Russian chairmanship of the Arctic Council in their focus on sustainable Arctic shipping was identified.

3 Overarching aspects to improve Arctic marine conservation

Building on the exchanges in the working groups, several approaches were identified that would improve Arctic marine conservation: 1) inclusive conservation efforts, particularly co-creation of approaches with Indigenous and local communities, 2) bottom-up governance solutions while working towards filling remaining crucial governance gaps at the international level, 3) international harmonisation / standardisation of data collection and facilitation of international data sharing, 4) effective area-based management to improve biodiversity protection, and 4) “storytelling” to raise awareness for Arctic marine conservation issues.

- 1) All groups identified the inclusion of Indigenous rights holders and local stakeholders as a prerequisite to improve decision-making and the need to incorporate Indigenous research and knowledge. Transnational cooperation at the regional level will give this approach space to solve concrete issues. An early and comprehensive involvement of other stakeholders, e.g. businesses, can support the mainstreaming of conservation measures and help to ensure their acceptance. These exchanges require venues and opportunities to meet.
- 2) Regional and international cooperation remain key to fill governance gaps (incl. within the Arctic Council and international frameworks). Views on who should be given the mandate for the discussed topics differed, but creating a Regional Sea Organization / Convention for the Arctic, including a mandate for Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ), might facilitate agreement on, and implementation of, marine conservation measures. At the same time, sub-regional cooperation would allow progress on specific issues.
- 3) The discussions showed that the available data, in spite of gaps, is already sufficient to justify action on several levels. At the same time, data exchange across several states suffers from substantial challenges. Improved regional cooperation in this regard could also foster the national work towards more effective Arctic marine biodiversity conservation.
- 4) Designation and subsequent effective management of area-based management tools, incl. MPAs, in the Arctic would help to address a number of the challenges identified in the working groups.
- 5) Moving the discourse ahead - beyond policy frameworks and scientific data - requires an improved space for storytelling, allowing Arctic inhabitants to share their experiences. These could further show decision makers pathways forward, identifying specific challenges and ideas for inclusive solutions, including those based on traditional and Indigenous knowledge.