

The Imperiled Beaufort and Chukchi Seas

America's Arctic Ocean

The Chukchi and Beaufort Seas lie off the North Slope Alaska and comprise America's portion of the Arctic Ocean. The marine ecosystems of Arctic Ocean are among the least understood in the world. The Beaufort Sea ranging from Canada to Barrow, Alaska is home to one-tenth of the world's polar bears, as well as seals, migratory birds, and endangered bowhead whales and other marine life. To the West is the Chukchi Sea a pristine ocean area between Alaska and Russia that supports approximately another one-tenth of the world's remaining polar bear population. It's also a spring and fall migration route for endangered bowhead and beluga whales, a feeding area for gray and finback whales and Pacific walrus, and habitat for migratory birds.



Courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Inupiat People of the North Slope depend on the marine life of the Arctic for survival of their ancient subsistence culture. The bowhead whale is especially important as a central focus of this subsistence society.

Threats

No region on earth is suffering the impacts of global warming more than the Arctic. Vital sea ice habitat is melting at an accelerating rate, placing such species as the polar bear, walrus and ice seals at risk, as well as the people of the North Slope who depend upon marine wildlife for their subsistence culture. Moreover, the retreat of sea ices is dangerously increasing coastal erosion and we are now seeing the ominous thawing of Arctic permafrost onshore. Added to the threat of climate change is the Bush administration's relentless promotion of massive oil and gas development, both onshore and offshore. With climate change the coming years will bring additional potential threats from shipping and commercial fishing.

The Bush administration's headlong rush to open Beaufort and Chukchi Seas to environmentally risky offshore oil and gas development is further affecting these delicate ecosystems as well as the marine life and Alaska Native communities they support. Massive oil and gas development poses direct threats of oil spills, pollution, and industrial disturbance. The Department of Interior has estimated that there is significant chance of an oil spill in the Arctic Ocean that will impact marine wildlife. Even more troubling is the fact that no technology exists to effectively clean up oil spills in the often icy and harsh conditions found in the Arctic. Oil and gas development, and other industrial activities also add to the threat of climate change by increasing emissions of greenhouse gases into the Arctic.

Hope for Change

With the change in administrations comes hope for change in the way the federal government views the Arctic Ocean. The League and our Alaska Native and conservation allies have recommended that the Obama administration develop a comprehensive conservation and energy plan for the federal waters of the Arctic. This plan should be based on sound science and determine if, where, when and how any industrial activities are allowed to proceed, and ensure that any development does not pose a threat to the environment or the subsistence culture of the Inupiat People. Until such time as this plan is developed and in place, there should be a time-out on all new industrial development activities, including those related to oil and gas development.

The League continues to pursue this course with Administration officials and in the halls of Congress. We also continue to address the reckless push for the development initiated by the Bush administration through the courts.