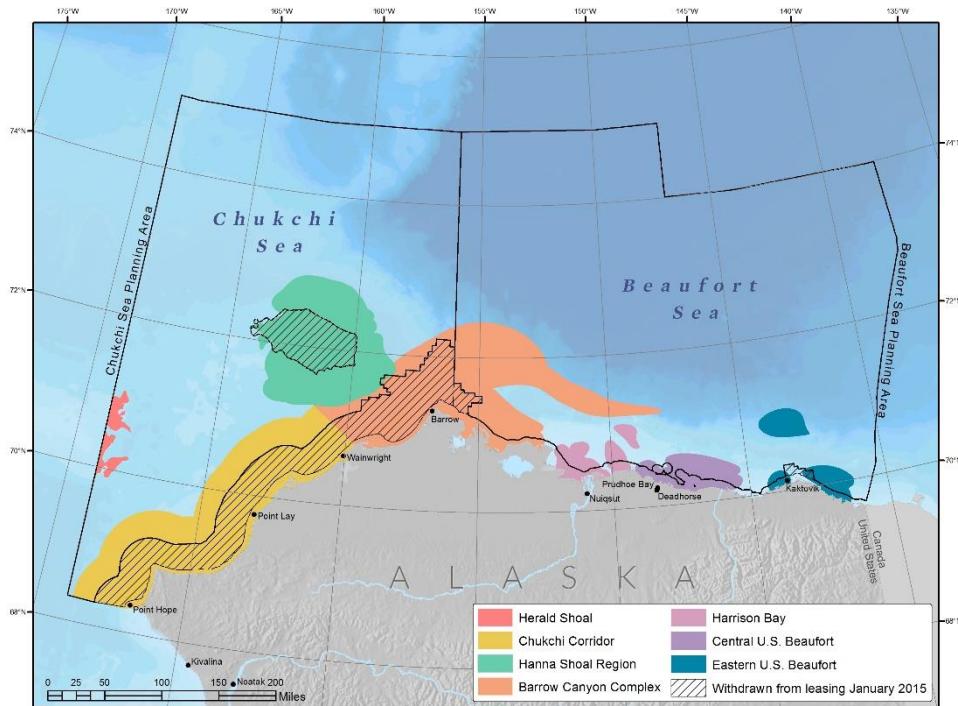




## America's Arctic Ocean: Abundance of Important Marine Areas

America's Arctic Ocean - which includes the Beaufort and Chukchi seas - is a vulnerable region, home to polar bears, walrus, seals, bowhead whales and many species of birds. These seas play an important role in regulating the world's climate and are the source of life in coastal communities. The Arctic Ocean is already suffering from the increasing effects of climate change – polar bears are spending more time ashore and towns are falling into the sea. With oil and gas companies giving up almost every lease held in the Chukchi Sea, now is the time to implement proactive protections in the Beaufort and Chukchi.



Although all areas of the Chukchi and Beaufort seas contribute to a thriving ecosystem, some areas are especially vital to the health of the ocean and its people. An extensive review of the best available Arctic science has resulted in the identification of several important marine areas in the Arctic Ocean. In January 2015, President Obama took the first important step to protecting these areas when he withdrew 9.8 million acres in the Arctic Ocean from future oil and gas leasing. Several of these important marine areas are outlined below:

### **Chukchi Corridor**

In a 50-mile-wide band along the Chukchi Sea coast, from Point Hope to Wainwright, Alaska, one of the largest marine migrations in the world occurs each spring. America's most loved marine mammals traverse this corridor such as beluga and bowhead whales, walrus, ice seals and seabirds. The outer band of the Chukchi Corridor is where you can find beluga whales, bearded seals, polar bears, gray whales, spectacled eiders and other seabird species.

### **Hanna and Herald Shoals**

Hanna and Herald Shoals are shallow sections of the Arctic Ocean that maintain ice floes by diverting warmer water. The rest of the Arctic Ocean melts around them in the summer. Because of this unique water current, Herald and Hanna Shoals are a stronghold for ice-dependent wildlife like the Pacific walrus, polar bear, gray whale, bearded seal and ringed seal. Walrus come to feed near the shoals after haul-outs on the Chukchi Sea coast. And ivory gulls, king eiders and beluga whales migrate through this area.

### **Barrow Canyon**

Barrow Canyon is a deep, 150-mile-long underwater canyon straddling the Chukchi and Beaufort seas. Barrow Canyon is an important feeding area for bowhead and beluga whales. Bowhead whales come to the area to feed on tiny organisms trapped from wind and ocean currents, while beluga whales feed on arctic cod around the canyon and along the shelf break to the east.



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### **Smith Bay**

Smith Bay supports a remarkable range of arctic and migratory species. The shallow waters host high concentrations of zooplankton, on which bowhead whales feed in summer and fall. Smith Bay also attracts shorebirds each fall and is a National Audubon Society Important Bird Area for globally significant numbers of king and spectacled eiders, yellow-billed and red-throated loons, and Pacific black brant. Spotted seals haul out along the coast and islands between July and November, and ringed seals build snow-covered lairs on the sea ice in winter and spring.

### **Harrison Bay-Colville Delta**

Just east of Teshekpuk Lake, the Colville River flows into Harrison Bay. Because of the powerful river outflow, Harrison Bay is shallow and rich with nutrients for thriving habitat. The waters of Harrison Bay and the Colville River Delta make an ideal refuge for many bird species. In addition to the numerous bird species, wintering polar bears hunt and feed on ice seals. Pregnant polar bears frequently build winter dens in and around the area. In recognition of its vital role in the lifecycles of these species, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has designated the Colville River Delta a most environmentally significant area.

### **Oliktok Point to Demarcation Bay**

The nearshore areas of the central and eastern Beaufort coast are an important migratory pathway for fish and marine mammals. The region's lagoons, barrier islands, and surrounding waters provide ideal conditions and food for many species. This area serves as pupping habitat for ringed and bearded seals, and attracts high densities of polar bears looking for food and places to build maternal dens. These places serve as important subsistence areas for residents of the nearby Iñupiat villages of Nuiqsut and Kaktovik.

### **Camden Bay**

The relatively deep waters close to shore in Camden Bay, found along the eastern Beaufort Sea coast of Alaska, allow bowhead whales to stay and feed rather than migrating through. Ringed, spotted and bearded seals can also be found in this area. Because the whales can come closer to shore, residents of Kaktovik and Nuiqsut hunt for fish and whales in the bay. Nearby and ecologically interconnected to Camden Bay is the productive and sensitive coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Polar bears use this area for critical denning habitat.

### **Bottom Line**

With oil and gas companies leaving America's Arctic, President Obama should chart a new course forward that halts future leasing and implements lasting protections in the Arctic Ocean.

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