

Why the Arctic Matters

Curriculum links: Current events, science, the environment, critical thinking, civics

Briefing: Because of global warming, the North Pole is warming twice as fast as the rest of the planet. Last year's summer Arctic ice cap was half the size it was 50 years ago. Some effects of global warming on the region are tragic—sea levels are rising, for example, and melting ice is shrinking the polar bear's habitat. But there are benefits as well. Norway's new offshore energy field, once unreachable because of ice, is expected to produce \$1.4 billion worth of liquefied natural gas annually. Arctic oil already has helped make Russia the world's second-biggest oil producer. And new Arctic shipping routes could turn humble villages into international ports.

Countries such as the U.S., Canada, Norway, and Russia are racing to map the Arctic ocean floor and stake claims to areas that hold potentially vast undersea oil and gas deposits. In the near future, governments will divide up thousands of square miles of sea floor—areas where the ocean surface will remain international but one country will own the mineral rights underneath. "This will be the greatest division of lands on Earth possibly ever to occur," says American energy consultant Paul Kelly. Relations among Arctic countries are friendly today, but that could change. Russia claims an area of ocean bottom larger than France and Spain combined, and angered other countries by dropping its flag on the ocean floor last year. "The Arctic is ours," boasted one Russian legislator. The U.S., on the other hand, may find itself left behind, because it has fewer icebreaking ships ready to map the region and fewer land claims in to the U.N. Congress also has not ratified the international Law of the Sea treaty, which will be used to determine who gains control of offshore areas. A U.N. commissioner who will help review Arctic land claims says that other nations' claims may be recognized while America delays ratifying the treaty. Some experts warn that without better diplomatic coordination between countries in the region, the Arctic may descend into armed conflict. Another change global warming has brought to the region is the opening of new shipping routes in waters once covered by ice. The U.S. expects that American consumers could see lower costs for many goods if ships from Asia can follow new northern routes. A ship sailing from China to New York could shave more than 3000 miles off each trip by going through the Arctic and save as much as \$2 million on fuel and Panama Canal fees. "What happens in the Arctic," says Coast Guard Rear Adm. Arthur Brooks, "is a big deal to America. And it's happening now."

Classroom Debates

Is it possible for global warming to have positive as well as negative effects? Should the U.S. be willing to go to war over Arctic land claims? Should there be limits on oil drilling and similar activity in the Arctic? In the end, what should be more important to Americans—economic benefits or environmental damage?

Newspaper activity: Scan the paper for articles about global warming, its effect on the Arctic, and possible economic benefits and disputes. What conclusions can you draw from the pieces? Share them with the class.

Resources: Books: Barry Lopez' *Arctic Dreams* (Vintage, 2001), Fredrik Granath's *Vanishing World: The Endangered Arctic* (Abrams, 2007), and Fred Krupp and Miriam Horn's *Earth: The Sequel* (W.W. Norton, 2008). Websites: Learn more from the Natural Resources Defense Council, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, *The International Herald Tribune*, and *Foreign Affairs*.