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MANAGING ARCTIC FISH STOCKS

by Michael Distefano*

Humans depend on marine fish stocks for economic and nutritional purposes throughout the world. Consequently, commercial fleets and super-trawlers are nothing new and many countries have found ways to regulate fleet sizes and catch limits within their territorial waters. But something new is happening in the Arctic Circle. As sea ice begins to disappear during summer months, a previously inaccessible fishing ground is emerging, and like all fishing grounds, it will be susceptible to mismanagement and exploitation.

Those who understand the danger have already begun to take action. On August 3, 2007, Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK) introduced a joint resolution, Senate Joint Resolution 17, that calls on the United States to initiate international discussions and take necessary steps with other Arctic nations to negotiate an agreement for managing migratory and transboundary fish stocks.¹ The resolution passed the Senate on October 4, 2007 and is currently pending in the House.² The resolution is an attempt to meet the changing Arctic environment with an orderly and sustainable framework to manage regional fisheries.

Gradually warming ocean temperatures have caused many species of fish to migrate north in search of cold-water habitats. At the same time, changes in Arctic sea ice have made the northern seas increasingly more navigable. Last summer, for the first time since satellite measurements began, a fully navigable route opened between the Atlantic and Pacific.³ This “Northwest Passage” was widely covered in the media and some scientists predict that an iceless Arctic Ocean could be the norm by 2040.⁴


The concurrence of receding Arctic ice and north-bound fish stocks is already creating an environment favorable to commercial fishing, and Senator Stevens’ proposed legislation is an attempt to make sure this transition is handled in an effective and responsible way. The resolution calls for the creation of a new international fisheries management organization for the region and seeks a halt in the expansion of Arctic commercial fishing activities until this is achieved.⁵


Successful fishery management programs employ “science-based limits on harvest, timely and accurate reporting of catch data, equitable allocation and access systems, and effective monitoring and enforcement.”⁶ This approach protects not only fish species, but also billions of dollars in commerce and tens

of thousands of jobs. Iceland, for example, relies on commercial fishing for nearly seventy percent of its income.⁷ When a particular stock is overfished, smaller and immature fish make up a greater percentage of the catch, and the stock’s regenerative capabilities may be seriously undermined. The result is a reduction in overall fishing hauls and a negative ripple effect on the food chain. Simply put, all countries and all people have a marked interest in ensuring global fish stocks remain healthy and sustainable over the long term.

This is by no means the first attempt at regulating regional fish stocks. Successful catch-share programs are already employed in nations such as Iceland, New Zealand, and the United States. Observers hail Alaska as a world leader in managing commercial and recreational fish stocks—as the state harvests over fifty percent of U.S. seafood without overfishing any of its stocks.⁸ Alaska’s marine fisheries are managed by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (“NPFMC”), a federally mandated council that is lending its support to S.J. Res. 17 and actually preempted the resolution by calling for a ban on Arctic fishing until a sustainable management scheme is developed.

Former chairman of the NPFMC, David Benton, points out that even the most competent fishery regulation will be unsuccessful without the support of other Arctic nations such as Canada, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Russia, and the European Union.⁹ When nations perceive the opportunity to claim a strategic resource, they may end up in a scramble for the first foothold, or worse yet, attempt to gather as much of that resource as they can before others get the opportunity.

In the past, management schemes were afterthoughts—they developed around marine regions that were heavily fished, and in many cases, there was already damage that would take generations to mend.¹⁰ In this case, however, there is an opportunity to get things right at the beginning. Senator Stevens’ resolution is a welcome move, but it is merely a start. With any luck, the House will pass the resolution soon, and the real work can begin. 

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ENDNOTES: **MANAGING ARCTIC FISH STOCKS** *continued from page 13*

¹ S.J. Res. 17, 110th Cong. (2007).

² Congress.org, Legislation Details for S.J. Res. 17, 110th Cong. (2007), *available at* <http://www.congress.org/congressorg/issues/bills/?billtype=S.J.RES.&billnumb=17&congress=110> (last visited Feb. 18, 2008).

³ Reuters, *Arctic sea route opens* (Sept. 15, 2007), *available at* <http://www.enn.com/ecosystems/article/23070> (last visited Feb. 18, 2008).

⁴ Reuters, *id.*

⁵ S.J. Res. 17.

⁶ S.J. Res. 17.

⁷ Allthingsarctic.com, *Overfishing in the Arctic*, *available at* <http://www.allthingsarctic.com/environment/overfishing.aspx> (last visited Feb. 18, 2008).

⁸ DON PHILLIPS, *OUR FRAGILE COASTAL FISHERIES 101* (2004); Press Release, Marine Conservation Alliance, *MCA Backs Resolution calling for Precautionary Approach given Climate Change* (Oct. 22, 2007), *available at* www.marineconservationalliance.org/press/pr20071022.pdf (last visited Feb. 18, 2008).

⁹ David Benton, *Approach Arctic fishing with caution*, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, Nov. 14, 2007, *available at* http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/opinion/339687_fisheries15.html (last visited Feb. 18, 2008).

¹⁰ *'New Ocean Ethic' is Recommended*, N.Y. TIMES, July 29, 2003, at F2.