



Message from the NSTF Executive Director

The Grinch who is stealing the North Pole

Where are you spending your Christmas holidays? I have been looking up possibilities online.

In 2007 the Russians planted a flag made of titanium at the North Pole – not above on the Arctic ice, but below, on the seabed. Planting a flag above the ice posed no challenge anymore. Russian nuclear powered ice breakers had made light work of the Arctic ice cap already. Once they made their trip by icebreaker to the Pole for a scientific expedition led by the famous Russian explorer Artur Chilingarov, two Russian mini-submarines were lowered through a hole in the ice, travelled the 4,200 m down and planted the indestructible Russian flag.

Canada, the US and Denmark, among others, were outraged. No-one owns the North Pole. It is located in international waters. Canada pointed out that it was no longer the 15th century, so one could not go around planting flags and claiming territories. But the Russians argue that they should have preference (they have their reasons) and this flag-planting was a symbolic act.

That flag caused ripples across the world at that time, but I cannot remember seeing it in the media since then. Is it just that South Africa has a greater kinship to the South Pole? Even elsewhere in the world, apart from the Arctic countries, there seems to be little interest in developments in the far north. Countries have not competed in earnest like this for the North Pole before. It was reserved as the territory of Santa Claus or Father Christmas – to be hallowed and undisturbed in people's imaginations, engulfed in a spirit of general goodwill and sentimentality, especially for this time of year. There were also, however, long, perilous and deadly treks across the inhospitable ice, with the North Pole as destination. Challenging expeditions have been made since the 17th century. When the pioneer heroes tramped through the snow and ice, surviving against the odds, and reached the Pole, it was a question of honour and pride (much like winning a Rugby World Cup). However, now the prize is so much bigger – a controlling stake of the Arctic sea that is emerging as the ice cap melts.

Concern about versus control over the Arctic

Back to 2007: it was one of the hottest years experienced by then, and the sea ice shrank to an unprecedented extent that summer. Monitoring by satellite revealed this alarming news. Although most people who are worried about the Earth's future, and ours, are disturbed by the melting of the ice caps due to climate change, and in its turn, accelerating climate change, it seems that others regard this as a vast and profitable opportunity. Most of us look at images of massive cliffs of ice dissolving or breaking off to become ice bergs, and are told that this is happening more frequently, and that the polar bears are struggling to find their 'bearings' (i.e. the ice that was their hunting ground, that helped them raise their cubs, and to sleep safely, is disappearing). Some of us become intensely concerned about such things, and not just about the polar bears. However, the other reaction to the news about the shrinking ice at the Arctic is to become competitive and join the 'gold rush'. Countries are positioning themselves to have control of the Arctic, while crowds of people are protesting across the world and insisting on an end to greenhouse gas emissions.

Having easier access to the ocean floor means access to great amounts of oil, gas and minerals. A quarter of the total undiscovered energy resources could lie beneath the Arctic, according to the US

Geological Survey's 2008 report: *Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle*. The estimates of the treasure troves are: 90 billion barrels of oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids, of which approximately 84 percent is expected to be in offshore areas. No wonder the Russians staked their claim on the Arctic ocean floor.

Russia's claim to the North Pole is based on an interpretation of the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention, Article 76. Russia argues that the undersea Lomonosov Ridge is an extension of the Russian landmass, and under this article their claim to the Arctic would extend all the way to the North Pole. The country had already lodged a claim in 2001, but was told by the UN's Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to resubmit the claim later. Nele Matz-Lück says, "The disputes on the boundaries of the outer continental shelf cannot be settled finally by the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf or by dispute settlement under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea but only by agreement amongst the parties themselves."

How will control over resources that are currently under ice be shared out among the Arctic countries?

Russia ahead in Arctic 'gold rush'

By Paul Reynolds :



- 1) **North Pole:** Russia leaves its flag on the seabed, as part of its claims for oil and gas reserves
- 2) **Lomonosov Ridge:** Russia argues that this underwater feature is an extension of its continental territory and is looking for evidence
- 3) **200-nautical mile (370km) line:** Shows how far countries' agreed economic area extends beyond their coastline. Often set from outlying islands
- 4) **Russian-claimed territory:** The bid to claim a vast area is being closely watched by other countries. Some could follow suit

There are various methods for sharing out the Arctic sea which are being considered:

The "median line method", supported by Canada and Denmark, would divide the Arctic waters between countries according to their length of nearest coastline. This would give Denmark the Pole itself but Canada would gain as well.

The "sector method" would take the North Pole as the centre and draw lines south along longitudes. This would penalise Canada but Norway and, to a lesser extent, Russia, would gain.

Sea routes

As the ice melts, it also becomes increasingly feasible for ships to navigate and new sea routes are opening up. Currently these routes can still only be taken with the help of powerful icebreakers, but it is anticipated that by the summer of 2036, most of the winter sea ice in the Arctic will have melted. This might even happen earlier than 2036, because the thawing in general is happening faster than predicted. There is little doubt that this will happen in my daughter's and my soon-to-be grandchild's lifetimes. There will then be an easy shortcut between Russia and Canada, Alaska (US) and Greenland (Denmark), etc.

The world is changing

This general opening up will promote trade, and prospecting for oil, gas and mineral resources will happen (as it probably does already, one can speculate). Humanity's addiction to fossil fuels could be (or is being) re-kindled, and nuclear powered vessels will be manufactured in greater numbers. With new, rich oilfields, Africa's fossil fuel resources will shrink in significance. At the tip of Africa we are likely to find ourselves far from the action, and ships need no longer sail past our badly-managed ports.

It's a matter of speculation how much the ripple-effects of the thawing Arctic will affect us and whether the scenario sketched here above will happen at all. It will be determined by politics, and the relative military strength of the Arctic nations, and how much oil and gas can feasibly be extracted. What is clear is that the northern nations are positioning themselves and establishing military bases from where they can protect their stake in the Arctic.

It is only recently that the United States has woken up to this situation. Alaska gives the US a modest but crucial stake in the Arctic. Now the training of soldiers is being stepped up in Alaska where they are learning to operate more efficiently in bitterly cold conditions. This has not been much of a priority for the US before. Both the US and Canada (which has a large share of the Arctic Circle) have only recently established bases and recruited assistance from among the Inuit people. These indigenous people are being trained and employed at last, having long been neglected together with the icy world they inhabited.

The US's new interest in the North is demonstrated by the recent attendance of Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of State of a meeting of the Arctic Council. The other Arctic countries were surprised, as the US Administration is opposed to the Council's progressive stance on climate change. He said: "... far from the barren backcountry that many thought it to be... the Arctic is at the forefront of opportunity and abundance." (National Geographic). Now I also understand why President Donald Trump wants to buy Greenland from Denmark. Is this also the reason for his climate change denialism? Large parts of the world's public are currently obsessed with climate change and GHG emissions (and so we should be). In the meantime, Trump and President Vladimir Putin can laugh from their dizzy height at a young and brave girl from Sweden who has been reprimanding world leaders for their callousness in the face of climate change. Their callousness may be worse than we thought.

One can get very cynical. There is not only one Grinch.

As to the question of where to spend the holidays:

My Christmas time recommendation for a 'break-away' is a visit to the North Pole. This is your last chance to experience ice that thick at that place. The downside is that it's winter in the Arctic. So the Russian icebreaker might make slower progress, and you might have to walk the rest of the way if it does get stuck. If on the other hand, you postpone your visit to say, 2036, a French cruise boat will be waiting for you. Alternatively, do a braai this holiday season and fantasise with the little ones about a

truly mythical and generous old man dressed in thick furs of red and white, who travels by sled. His time is running out...

Some highlights - history of the quest for the North Pole:

(Wikipedia and other sources used for this commentary)

- 1937 – First North Pole ice station: North Pole-1 (Soviet Union) established about 20 kilometres from the Pole. The expedition members: an oceanographer, a meteorologist, a radio operator and the leader Ivan Papanin conducted scientific research at the station for 274 days. On February 19, 1938, the group was evacuated by the ice breakers [Taimyr](#) and [Murman](#). The station had drifted 2850 km and was approaching the eastern coast of Greenland.
- 1948: First landing at the North Pole: three planes of the *Sever-2* expedition (Soviet Union) of 24 scientists and flight crew led by [Aleksandr Kuznetsov](#).
- 1949: Soviet Union parachuted two scientists, Vitali Volovich and Andrei Medvedev, onto the surface of the North Pole in a bit of Cold War one-upmanship with Canada. Russia is planning to celebrate a belated 60th anniversary of the event by conducting a paratroop drop at the North Pole.
- 1958: First vessel to reach the North Pole: the submarine [USS Nautilus](#).
- 1968: First to reach North Pole by surface travel (on [Ski-Doo](#)): [Ralph Plaisted](#).
- 1968-1969: First to reach the North Pole by [dogsled](#): team led by Sir [Wally Herbert](#).
- 1977: First [surface ship](#) to reach North Pole: [nuclear-powered icebreaker Arktika](#) (Soviet Union).
- 2006: First to reach North Pole during the Arctic winter: [Børge Ousland](#) and [Mike Horn](#).
- 2007: first to dive to the sea bed at the North Pole: [Arktika 2007](#) expedition by two [MIR submarines](#).
- 2017: Polar Row, led by world's fastest ocean rower Fiann Paul, is the most record-breaking man-powered expedition (11 Guinness World Records). The team covered 2317 km measured in a straight line in the Arctic Ocean in a rowboat They pioneered ocean rowing routes from Tromsø to Longyearbyen, from Longyearbyen to Arctic Ice Shelf (79°55'500 N) and from the Arctic Ice Shelf to Jan Mayen.

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The opinions expressed above are those of the Executive Director, Jansie Niehaus, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Executive Committee or members of the NSTF.