

Bottom-up approaches to managing conflict in Arctic Marine Ecosystems – the Open Water Season Conflict Avoidance Agreement and the Arctic Waterways Safety Plan

Martin Robards, Jessica Lefevre, Willie Goodwin, and Harry Brower Jr.

Numerous reports and scholarly publications extol the need for, and virtues of progressive governance approaches in the Arctic. Driving this need is the imperative to respond to rapidly changing environmental, social, and cultural conditions, as well as the unique economic and food security needs of the indigenous peoples that line much of the Arctic's coastline. Many reports and publications also note the significant efforts to formalize pan-Arctic, bilateral, and cross-cultural policies and agreements. However, effective implementation of these higher level policies and guidelines requires a complementary approach that is built from the ground up; where mutually acknowledged problems are addressed among local stakeholders, leading to local solutions that dovetail with those higher-level guidelines and policies. Here, we briefly describe two such efforts that take place in the Northern Bering-Chukchi Seas and Beaufort Sea Large Marine Ecosystems (LMEs). The Open Water Season Conflict Avoidance Agreement and the Arctic Waterways Safety Plan both exhibit attributes consistent with the six elements that are envisioned to frame an ecosystem approach to management of Arctic marine ecosystems. Furthermore, they incorporate within their goals the sustainable use of natural resources, while maintaining the integrity of the dynamic Arctic ecosystem. We present several key take home messages from the two processes that led to agreements, including: 1) the importance of beginning all discussions of this type in collaboration with affected local communities, to ensure the integration of local knowledge and the economic and traditional needs of local communities in all outcomes; 2) the importance of setting clear goals and objectives, and reaching consensus on a common understanding of the policy problems being addressed; 3) recognition that boundaries among the health of the physical environment, wildlife, and human communities are seamless; 4) recognition of the significant length of time required to engage in a meaningful process toward the end goal of developing agreements; and 5) the value of informal processes of problem solving to support more formal laws and policies. Both the Conflict Avoidance Agreement and the Arctic Waterways Safety Plan are examples of highly successful processes that started informally, at the local level, and are succeeding at addressing local, national, and international maritime conflicts between development, traditional practices, and wildlife.