EBM Perspective: Marine Spatial Planning in the Arctic

Editor's note: Charles Ehler, president of Ocean Visions (Paris, France), served as marine spatial planning consultant to the Aspen Institute's Commission on Arctic Climate Change and was co-author of UNESCO's guide to marine spatial planning, published in 2009 (www.unesco-ioc-marinesp.be/publications).

In January 2011, the Aspen Institute released The Shared Future, the report of its dialogue and commission on Arctic climate change (www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/pubs/Aspen_Climate_Change_Report_2011.pdf). The report identifies strategies and approaches to conserve the ecological resources of the Arctic Ocean and to ensure sustainable livelihoods for communities that depend on these resources. It offers several recommendations to strengthen management of the Arctic marine environment to sustain the resilience of the region's multiple interdependent ecosystems. The report includes a technical section, “Marine Spatial Planning in the Arctic: A first step toward ecosystem-based management,” that is the basis of this essay.

By Charles Ehler

The Arctic - all 30 million square kilometers of it - is one of the most pristine, yet vulnerable, ecosystems in the world. Protected by its historic inaccessibility, harsh environment, comparatively small human population, and slow rate of economic development, the Arctic has been relatively less affected by human activity than most other regions on Earth.

This is about to change. Driven by outside economic forces and the effects of climate change, the Arctic, its ecosystems, and its people are all faced with substantial change ranging from the loss of ice-dependent species, more intense human uses of the Arctic, and the loss of natural services provided by Arctic ecosystems. As the Arctic warms, its ice melts and its ecosystems change. As technology improves, and as the demand for natural resources increases, opportunities open up for industry: shorter shipping routes, virgin fishing grounds, new areas of oil and gas exploration and development, and new places for commercial tourism. As well as business opportunities, these changes represent new risks to the Arctic's unique natural environment and to the people who now live and work in the Arctic. Once these new human activities begin in the Arctic, it will be difficult for policy makers and managers to put limits on them.

Marine spatial planning (MSP) would be a new approach in most areas of the Arctic. However, in Norway, an ecosystem-based, integrated marine management plan, including spatial and temporal management measures, has been developed already for the Barents Sea and the sea areas off the Lofoten Islands. The plan covers all waters from one nautical mile off the coast to the seaward limit of the Norwegian EEZ, as well as the fishery protection zone around the Svalbard archipelago - a total marine area covering 1.4 million km². Norway is one of the few countries that have successfully integrated all major economic activities (oil and gas development, fisheries, and marine transport) together with nature conservation in its marine spatial planning activities. The plan for the Barents Sea was initiated in 2002 and completed in 2006; the initial plan is now being revised. An integrated marine management plan for the Norwegian Sea (1.2 million km²) has also been developed recently.

Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans completed in 2009 an integrated marine management plan for the Canadian portion of the Beaufort Sea (1.75 million km²) as part of an ecosystem-based management program for five large ocean management areas (LOMAs) in Canada. The integrated management plan does not address MSP, but recommends MSP be conducted for the Beaufort Sea LOMA. Greenland, Russia, and the United States have no marine spatial plans for their sectors of the Arctic.

Potential approaches to Arctic MSP

The Aspen Institute report The Shared Future identifies five potential approaches to MSP in the Arctic:

1. "Business as usual" - an incremental decision making approach;
2. A "bilateral approach" between national governments;
3. A "hot spot" approach;
4. An Arctic-wide "systems approach" among national governments; and
5. An Arctic-wide "systems approach" beyond national governments and led by indigenous peoples of the Arctic.

Under the fourth approach, planning for integrated EBM should be encouraged across all Arctic countries as the full report of the Aspen Institute suggests - and a focus on MSP could be a first step in that direction. This approach would tackle the entire Arctic region, probably under the aegis of the intergovernmental Arctic Council. While the Arctic Council is not an operational body that can impose obligations on its participants, it could undertake MSP for the entire Arctic region with the understanding that implementation of any plan would be the responsibility of individual Arctic coastal nations. Ideally, all interested and affected constituencies, including indigenous peoples, Arctic communities, governments, and the business sector, should participate in the MSP process. However, governments are often slow or unwilling to implement large, ecosystem-based, strategic planning initiatives, especially across borders. In Canada, for example, integrated marine plans that were completed several years ago still await approval by the national government.

In the fifth approach, indigenous peoples from the Arctic could take the initiative to develop an Arctic-wide approach to MSP through a network of their organizations including the Aleut International Association, the Arctic Athabaskan Council, the Gwich'in Council International, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), and the Saami Council. While capacity building to begin MSP might be needed, technical advice could be sought from the Coastal First Nations Planning Office in Vancouver, British Columbia (Canada), and the Beaufort Sea Planning Office in Inuvik, Northwest Territories (also Canada), both of which have experience with MSP at a large scale. Initially the Arctic Council Indigenous Peoples Secretariat in Copenhagen, Denmark, could provide coordination of an initiative.

Alternatively, the initiative could be self-organizing, relying on the interests and initiative of a few indigenous organizations. Leadership of a MSP initiative by indigenous peoples could provide the basis for other stakeholders - the business and NGO communities, for example - to collaborate actively in the planning process. Eventually the
Arctic Council and national governments would join and participate, particularly in the implementation of spatial and temporal management measures.

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