

The Telegram (St. John's)

Coveting the Arctic

Tuesday, February 17, 2009
Page: A6
Section: Editorial

Sometimes, you can just see the conflict coming. And in this case, you can also see pretty handily how the story's going to end.

Last week, the U.S. North Pacific Fishery Management Council recommended that the American government ban fishing in Arctic waters until scientists get a better handle on what's in the ocean there, and how things are changing.

Scientists already know that a warming ocean is seeing species on both coasts move further and further north, and with the retreating amounts of Arctic ice, fishing vessels could conceivably range further and further north as well.

Here's what the council says: "The environment in the Alaskan Arctic is changing, with warming trends in ocean temperatures and changes in seasonal sea ice conditions potentially favoring the development of commercial fisheries," adding that the U.S. government should "close the Arctic to commercial fishing so that unregulated fishing does not occur ... until information improves so that fishing can be conducted sustainably and with due concern to other ecosystem components."

It's a sentiment echoed by other scientists who are now watching a growing phenomenon of non-Arctic species moving both north and south into previously colder waters.

Canwest News Service reported Monday on a study by the University of British Columbia biologist William Cheung, who is lead author in newly published research in the British journal *Fish and Fisheries* that suggests species are changing their locations quickly. "Atlantic cod on the east coast of the U.S. may shift their distribution towards the Canadian coast by more than 30 kilometres per decade," the study says.

On top of everything else, a new census of Arctic marine species suggests there are some 5,500 kinds of plant and animal life in the Arctic Ocean - far more than anyone expected. Some of those species may be marketable, and some, with a warming ocean, may literally be on their last fins.

Connect all those dots and see what emerges: Arctic fisheries are likely to be the last new frontier for many struggling fishing nations, regardless of the lack of information available.

Many countries are trying to exercise Arctic sovereignty in an effort to expand their potential resource base for everything from oil to fish to subsea minerals, especially as the world economy has faltered.

Throw into the mix the idea that, faced with financial woes, even countries that used to trumpet precautionary fisheries numbers - like Iceland - are now looking at increasing quotas for strictly economic reasons, and letting environmental concerns wait for another, richer day.

Then ask yourself this: given everything else that's taking place in this world, and the experience we already have in destroying the world's fisheries, how realistic is it to expect that the Arctic Ocean will be addressed in any way other than with the rapacious species and habitat destruction we've brought to every other ocean?

Ice might have been the Arctic's only protection. If you think scientific warnings are enough, well, let us introduce you to the Grand Banks.

© 2009 Transcontinental Media G.P. All rights reserved.