

# WWF and Greenpeace: Two Strategies to Save the Arctic Ocean

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In the late 2010s, the two largest environmental NGOs in the world—the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace—were looking at the situation in the Arctic Ocean with increased concern. The rise in the Earth’s temperature had thinned the ice sheets, opening up vast regions of the ocean to human activity. Oil drilling, commercial shipping, intensive fishing and military activity now loomed over an ecosystem about which there was still much to discover, since the Arctic remained one of the least explored regions on the planet. Below the white ice sheets hid an ocean brimming with life, about which much was still unknown. The Arctic ecosystem was also home to over 40 different ethnic groups of people who depended on access to uncontaminated food and water for their survival. Furthermore, the ice sheets played a large role in regulating the world’s temperature, a process that was just beginning to be understood. A disruption in that delicate ecosystem could have a cascading effect on the whole planet.

Thus, an idea began making the rounds: perhaps both organizations could collaborate? The challenges posed by the situation in the Arctic were huge, and maybe if WWF and Greenpeace adopted a joint strategy (together they could pool over \$1 billion in funds and 8 million members), they would have a better chance of succeeding. Both organizations, alongside other NGOs, were already present in forums—on both a global and a local level—that established common environmental goals and agendas, but outside of that basic coordination collaboration was pretty much nonexistent. As a staff member at Greenpeace explained, “We agree on the objectives, but then we pursue them separately.”

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Was deeper collaboration possible, however? Was it even desirable? The fact was that WWF and Greenpeace were very different organizations and employed very distinct strategies. As a result, they proposed very different answers to the Arctic's problems.

## WWF's Approach



"We are working toward effective international stewardship to shield the Arctic from the worst effects of rapid change by promoting healthy living systems to the benefit of local peoples and all humanity."<sup>1</sup>

WWF's vision for the Arctic was threefold:

- Identify the environmental strengths of the Arctic in order to develop a long-term preservation strategy that could endure change.
- Develop standards and planning to ensure that economic development did not damage weakened ecosystems.
- Create an international system where rules about the management of resources in the Arctic were agreed upon and enforced.

To achieve these goals, WWF worked with governments and supranational entities, and it enjoyed observer status in the Arctic Council. It was the only nonregional NGO to enjoy that status (see Table 1).

## Greenpeace's Approach



"The Arctic is one of the most unique places on Earth. It spans eight countries, is home to more than 13 million people, and provides a habitat for truly incredible wildlife. And now, it's the battleground for one of the most important fights in environmental history."<sup>2</sup>

Greenpeace's goal was the creation of an Arctic Sanctuary where fishing, exploration for fossil fuels and military activity would be prohibited. Shipping in the area would be restricted, including the prohibition of burning highly polluting heavy fuel oil. This sanctuary would cover 2.8 million square meters, 20% of the Arctic Ocean's seabed, and it would be established in an area without human presence and beyond the Arctic nations' exclusive economic zones (EEZs).<sup>3</sup> Other, less-restrictive Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) would be established within the Arctic nations' EEZs, creating a comprehensive conservation network. In order to achieve this goal, Greenpeace wanted to pressure national governments to reach a comprehensive multilateral agreement for conservation in the Arctic. Another—albeit slower—alternative to a multilateral treaty was an UN-sponsored regulatory effort under the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Greenpeace hoped to follow the example of Antarctica, which was protected by a multilateral treaty signed in 1998.

<sup>1</sup> "The Arctic: How We work," World Wide Fund for Nature, [http://wwf.panda.org/knowledge\\_hub/where\\_we\\_work/arctic/what\\_we\\_do/](http://wwf.panda.org/knowledge_hub/where_we_work/arctic/what_we_do/), last accessed February 14, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> "Saving the Arctic," Greenpeace International, <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/arctic/>, last accessed February 14, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> An exclusive economic zone extended 200 miles from the coast of a country and denoted the marine area where it had special rights over its resources.



**Table 1**  
**Main Players in the Arctic Ocean Conservation Effort**

<b>Arctic Nations</b>	The countries whose EEZs were part of the Arctic Ocean: United States, Russia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland.
<b>The Arctic Council</b>	An international forum promoting cooperation and coordination on issues of sustainable development and conservation of the Arctic. Members were the Arctic Nations and representatives of the Arctic indigenous peoples.
<b>The United Nations</b>	Through the UNCLOS, it established general obligations for member nations to safeguard the marine environment and regulated resource extraction from the seabed beyond national waters.
<b>International Maritime Organization</b>	A UN agency that regulated shipping and set environmental standards for ships crossing the Arctic.
<b>Convention on Biological Diversity</b>	A multilateral treaty that had among its goals the conservation of Earth's biological diversity. All Arctic Nations except the United States had ratified membership.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

**Figure 1**  
**The Arctic Ocean**



**Dark lines denote main shipping routes.**

Source: Arctic Ocean entry in "The World Factbook," Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/xq.html#wfbPhotoGalleryModal>, last accessed June 10, 2018.