Arctic and Antarctic protected areas

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Highlights

1. Protected area status can potentially expose the environment to greater risk.
2. The geographic boundaries of protected areas can be fuzzy.
3. Climate change may lead to the de-designation of protected areas.

The sparsely populated and international geopolitical waters and landscapes of the Arctic and the Antarctic have made way for shared responsibilities of marine and terrestrial areas. Away from the poles, protected areas have been established and are managed most often by individual governments and organizations, proceed with minimal jurisdictional conflict, and are rarely de-designated. At the poles, protected areas differ.

What establishes and then who manages protected areas?

During the 19th century, expeditioners traveled to and extracted natural resources from both the Arctic and the Antarctic. Today, governments, including those that supported these expeditions, govern protected areas as individual countries and as parties to bilateral and multilateral agreements.[i] Protected areas are generally locations with policy specific to their protection.

Examples of protected areas in the Arctic include the Edéhzhíe Protected Area in Canada, managed by the Dehco Fish Nations and the Canadian government, and the Pasvik-Inari Trilateral Park, managed by Norway, Finland, and the Russian Federation. Categories of protected areas in the Arctic generally reflect their location: "Terrestrial Protected Areas," "Marine and Terrestrial Protected Areas," "Marine Protected Areas," and "De Facto Marine Protected Areas" (see Figure 1). Arctic protected areas are managed by an individual country or the signatories of an agreement. Governments and signatories can include Indigenous Peoples.

In the Antarctic, protected areas were first established in 1964 by the *Agreed Measures for the Conservation of Antarctic Fauna and Flora*. Upon entering into force in 1972, the *Antarctic Treaty* was used to protect Historic Sites and Monuments (HSM). Article V of the *Antarctic Treaty Protocol on Environmental Protection*, also known as the Madrid Protocol, entered into force in 1998 and protected two additional types of areas: "Antarctic Specially Protected Areas" (ASPA) and "Antarctic Specially Managed Areas" (ASMA).[ii] Areas with unique natural resources, such as the Ross Sea area, can be designated under the provisions of the *Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Seals* (1978) and the *Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources* (1982) (see Figure 2).

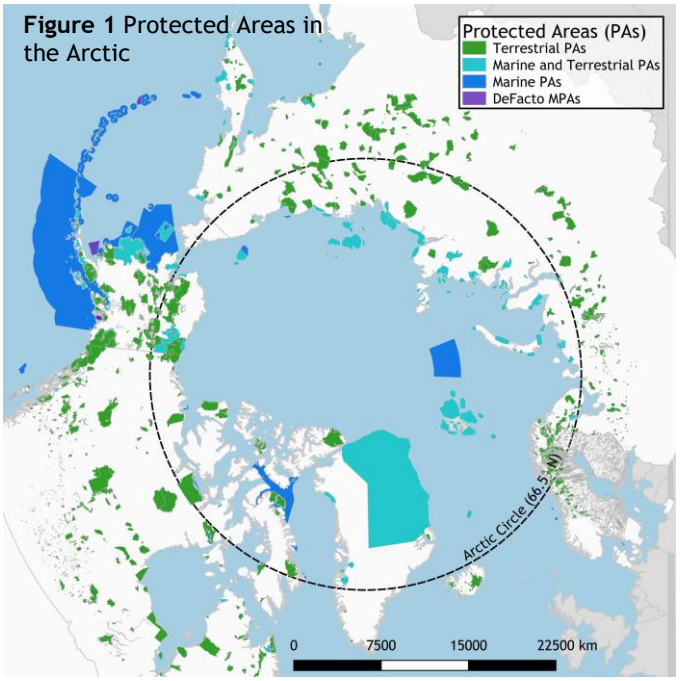

Figure 1 Protected Areas in the Arctic

Sources: https://protectedplanet.net, https://marineprotectedareas.noaa.gov/dataanalysis/defacto/

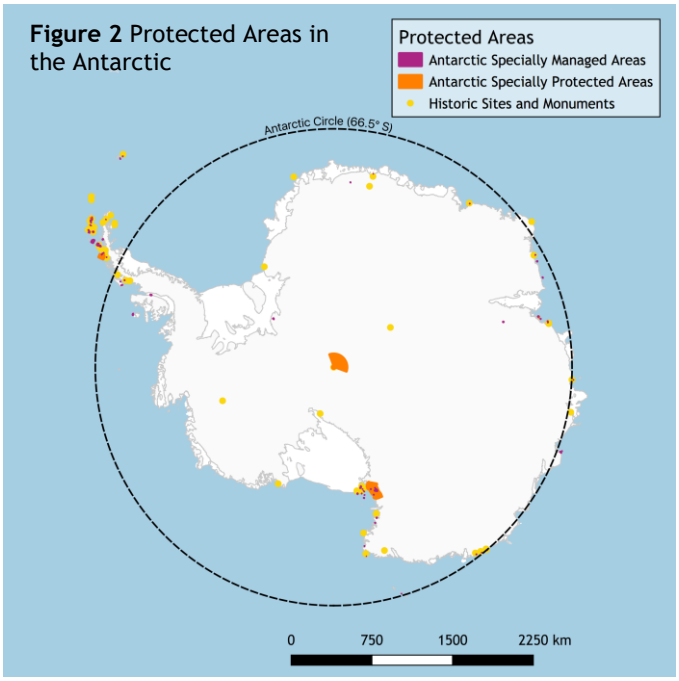

Figure 2 Protected Areas in the Antarctic

Source: http://quantarctica.npolar.no/data-catalog/

Since 1900, the climate has been warming twice as fast near the poles as elsewhere on the planet, and management of protected areas near the poles has begun adapting. What lessons can we learn from the protected areas in the Arctic and Antarctic?

Does obscurity provide security?

In 2012, members of the *Antarctic Treaty* began discussing the establishment of formal locations for "coastal camping" or "vessel-supported overnight stays" in Antarctica. Non-governmental operators are required to report all such activities in their initial environmental evaluation and submit camping requests to National Competent Authorities. Yet, the National Competent Authorities do not have consistent requirements or policy to ensure that campers have no more than a "minor or transitory impact." As the rate of coastal camping increases it could have unforeseen impacts, jeopardize sites of current or future scientific interest, and expand the overall footprint of activities in Antarctica. The latter point has been a consistent argument against establishing areas for camping. And it begs a broader question about the obscurity of protected areas: does establishing formal sites for activities in remote or exotic places like Antarctica protect those areas or invite "last-chance" tourists?

Location does not always matter

In early 2019, the Weddell Sea Expedition tried to locate the site of the Endurance wreck in 1915 and any of its remains in the Weddell Sea. They were not successful, and the exact location of the wreck remains unknown. Yet after the expedition, the "Endurance, Wreck of the vessel owned and used by Sir Ernest Shackleton during his 1914-15 Trans-Antarctic Expedition" HSM was established. The location of the HSM is described as: "wreck of the vessel Endurance, including all artefacts contained within or formerly contained within the ship, which may be lying on the seabed in or near the wreck within a 150m radius."[iii] Whether or not the artifacts are located, this HSM, its brief management plan, and education and outreach activities will continue.

De-designation due to climate change

Few protected areas have been de-designated. At mid-latitudes, sites of archaeological importance have been de-designated as protected areas after artifacts were removed. Near the poles, the changing habitats of key wildlife species has resulted in the redrawing of protected area boundaries, talk of the de-designation of protected areas that are no longer conservation hotspots (e.g., Important Bird Areas),[iv] and the pending de-designation of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Neither the Arctic nor Antarctica have formal guidelines for de-designation.

[i] Protected Areas in the Arctic Region. https://arctic-council.org/index.php/en/our-work2/8-news-and-events/249-protected-areas-in-the-arctic-region

[ii] Area Protection and Management/Monuments. https://www.ats.aq/e/ep_protected.htm

[iii] Measure 12 (2019) - ATCM XLII - CEP XXII, Prague

[iv] Final Report of the Forty-first Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting. Argentina 13 - 18 May 2018. https://www.ats.aq/devAS/ats_meetings_meeting.aspx?lang=e&id=85

The Center for Arctic Policy Studies (CAPS) at the University of Alaska makes knowledge concerning rapid environmental and social changes in the Arctic accessible to decision-makers, the public, and scholars.

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