

## International cooperation in the Arctic – 20 year anniversary

By Alf Håkon Hoel

The end of the cold war brought increased possibilities for international cooperation in the Arctic. The eight Arctic countries - Canada, Denmark (for the Faroes and Greenland) Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and USA - adopted the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) in 1991. The purpose of the AEPS was to strengthen the circumpolar cooperation on protection of the Arctic environment, among other things through the establishment of programs to monitor the status of the environment.

On the basis of the AEPS, the Arctic Council was established by the same eight countries in 1996.

### The Arctic Council

With the establishment of the Arctic Council, more structure was imposed on the cooperation. A working group on sustainable use was added, changing the profile of the cooperation from environmental protection to also include sustainable use of the Arctic environment and the resources there.

The substance of the work in the Arctic Council is carried out in its six working groups. In addition to sustainable use, there are working groups on monitoring and assessment of the Arctic environment, on conservation of flora and fauna, protection of the marine environment, and on emergency preparedness and prevention.

### Assessments

The working groups have performed a number of major assessments of various aspects of the Arctic environment and its use. The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment was a major effort to understand the impacts of climate change in the region. An oil and gas assessment has studied the situation in the region with regard to petroleum development and consequences of that. And a recent Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment has given us an overview of current shipping activities and likely future developments. Also the status of various forms of pollution has been subject to assessments.

The performance of these assessments has been important to improve our knowledge about the status of various aspects of the Arctic environment and their use for various purposes. This has perhaps been the most important outcome of the work under the Arctic Council thus far: we now know much more about the Arctic than we used to do.

Another important dimension of the cooperation is that it contributes to the development of mutual understanding of challenges relating to for example climate change and marine shipping in the Arctic. Such common understanding is a precondition for actual action to respond to such challenges. At the 2011 ministerial meeting in Nuuk, the ministers signed a treaty relating to search and rescue operation in Arctic waters. The initiative and understanding of the need for such a treaty was established through the Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment, which involved researchers and stakeholders from all Arctic countries. In the same vein, the 2011 ministerial initiated work on an Arctic oil spill agreement, which will draw on findings from the Oil and Gas Assessment.

### The Arctic has become larger

Traditionally, the Arctic has been conceived of as a region with perennial permafrost and ice-covered waters. In the work of the Arctic Council, a wider understanding of what the Arctic region is has been employed, including areas well south of 60 degrees North (the latitude of Stockholm and Helsinki) in the North Pacific and the Faroe Islands in the North Atlantic. Iceland, for example, has almost its entire land territory to the south of the Arctic Circle. This larger Arctic area is about 30 million km<sup>2</sup>, or almost three times the size of Europe.

The consequence of using such a wide definition is that the Arctic becomes much more interesting in economic terms: the ice-

free waters of the North Pacific and the North Atlantic are rich in natural resources. While most of the Central Arctic Ocean is ice-covered most of the year, the adjacent seas such as the Bering Sea, the waters around Iceland, the Northwest Atlantic and the Barents Sea are rich in living marine resources. Some of these seas are also important regions for petroleum development, now as well as in the future.

### An international agenda

The international attention to and interest in the Arctic has increased substantially over the last few years. The spectacular reductions in sea ice cover and mass, the loss of ice from the Greenland ice-cap and the consequences for marine life and people are major drivers behind this development. Just as important are the prospects of petroleum resources in particular - the region is assumed to harbor some 30 per cent of the world's undiscovered gas reserves and about 13 per cent of the undiscovered oil. High petroleum prices over time serves to boost the interest in the Arctic as a petroleum province.

Therefore, not only the Arctic countries are looking northwards. The increasing interest in the Arctic is a global phenomenon, with China, India, South Korea and others increasing their activities in the high north.

On this backdrop, the Arctic Council has become a much more important international arena than a few years ago. An important question is whether the current format of the cooperation is well adapted to a changing Arctic where more countries are stating an interest in participating in cooperation in science, economic activities, and cultural exchange. The 2011 ministerial took several important steps to respond to the changing circumstances. A new set of guidelines for observers was adopted, opening up for the admission of additional observer countries and other entities at the next ministerial meeting in 2013. Also, it was decided to establish a permanent secretariat in Tromsø from 2013, onwards, when Canada assumes the chairmanship from the current chair, Sweden. Also, the adoption of the search and rescue agreement as well as the initiation of negotiations of a new agreement on oil spill prevention can be seen as a response by the Arctic countries to a changing situation in the high north. Also, a new, comprehensive assessment - "the Arctic Change Assessment - addressing the changes in the region in a comprehensive manner, is in the works.

### The significance of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy

In the course of the twenty years since the adoption of the AEPS, we have seen significant leaps in our knowledge about a number of aspects of the region. Also, the knowledge is developed and communicated in an Arctic perspective, which can yield other insights than for example a national one. The second major development is the comprehensive framework for cooperation in the Arctic through the Arctic Council and its working groups. This framework has evolved over time and appears to be rising to the occasions.

*Alf Håkon Hoel*

*Regional Director*

*Institute of Marine Research*

*Norway*

