The Battle for the North Pole

The melting Arctic ice cap may be bad news for polar bears, but it is prompting a frantic scramble for territory and resources. What's at stake?

THE WEEK
5/12/2006

How fast is the ice cap melting?

The size of the summer polar ice cap has shrunk 20 percent since 1979, reaching its smallest size last year. With average temperatures in the Arctic rising twice as fast as elsewhere in the world, climate scientists predict the Arctic Ocean could be ice-free by the summer of 2050. In place of the white wilderness that killed explorers and defeated navigators for centuries, the world would have a blue North Pole and a seasonally open sea nearly five times the size of the Mediterranean. Last August, a Russian vessel, the Akademik Fyodorov, became the first ship to reach the North Pole without having to use an icebreaker.

Who stands to lose from all this?

The melting of the ice could shut down the Gulf Stream and wreak havoc with the world's coasts and climate. It would spell potential disaster for traditional Arctic communities, for ecosystems, and for plant and animal species—polar bears would drown or starve, and the species could become extinct. But fish would prosper. Warming Arctic waters are already creating new fishing grounds as fish migrate and adapt to new conditions. Pink salmon have been seen spawning in rivers far to the north of their traditional territory.

Who stands to gain?

The melting ice cap represents a colossal commercial opportunity. Russian icebreakers are already preparing to take tourists to the Pole for $30,000 each this summer, and the thaw could open up some highly lucrative shipping routes. A northeast sea route, north of Siberia, would allow shipping to sail from Europe to northeast Asia, cutting the journey by a third; and the fabled Northwest Passage through Canada's Arctic archipelago could be open to shipping in a few decades, cutting the journey from Europe to East Asia (now routed through the Panama Canal) by 4,000 miles. The greatest profits, however, are likely to be found under the ice.

What is being discovered there?

Oil and natural gas. A quarter of the world's untapped fossil fuels (including 375 billion barrels of oil) are thought to lie under the Arctic, and will become accessible as the ice melts. Industry experts now talk of a "black gold rush," as companies such as BP Amoco, Statoil of Norway, and the Russian giant Gasprom all race to tap already discovered reservoirs in the region. The Arctic, says Moscow-based energy analyst Christopher Weafer, "is the next energy frontier."

But who owns the Arctic?

Unlike the Antarctic, which was carved up in 1959, there is no international treaty to determine each Arctic nation's ownership. In 1932, when Stalin drew lines from the North Pole to either end of Russia's northern coast and designated it the USSR Polar Region, no one took much notice; the area seemed to offer only howling winds, drifting icebergs, and months of freezing darkness. Today it is the focus of fierce territorial disputes among the eight countries with claims: Russia, the United States, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland. Under

Article 76 of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, countries can claim a 200-nautical-mile exclusive zone and beyond that up to 150 nautical miles of rights on the seabed. But national zones can be expanded if a nation can establish that there is a “natural prolongation” of its continental shelf beyond previously recognized limits. Countries that ratified the Convention before 1999 have until 2009 to make their claims.

Is that a recipe for conflict?

Yes. Each summer, research ships from the Arctic nations set out on political missions to map the ocean floor to bolster territorial claims. The Akademik Fyodorov, for example, didn’t turn up at the North Pole just to prove it could reach it without an icebreaker. The research ship was there to shore up Russia’s claim, made in 2001, to almost half the Arctic Ocean, including the pole. But that claim has been challenged by Denmark, which insists the pole sits on the continental shelf belonging to Greenland (a Danish territory). Denmark is also locked in a dispute with Canada over Hans Island, a freezing lump of rock that could determine rights to drill for oil in the Nares Strait between Canada and Greenland; ministers from each side pay visits to the lump, and landing parties from both navies raise their flags and leave whiskey and brandy as tokens of their claims.

How will these conflicts be resolved?

In theory, through negotiation, but when two nations cannot agree, the U.N. Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf is brought in as an arbitrator. (It has just turned down a Russian demand for greater Arctic rights.) The U.S., however, won’t accept the commission’s authority, fearing that to do so would entail a loss of sovereignty over the seas above Alaska. Besides, the commission deals only with continental shelves, and most surveys suggest that only Russia’s and Denmark’s shelves extend far enough to give them a claim on the pole. Meanwhile, the race to extract the Arctic’s mineral wealth is likely to accelerate as sustained high oil prices fund ever-bolder exploration. The best that can be hoped for in the new Great Game is that contestants keep it orderly.

A passage across the Arctic

For hundreds of years, European explorers tried to open up new trade routes to China and Japan by using the fabled Northwest Passage through the polar coast of Canada. British mariner Martin Frobisher tried three times to get to Cathay the cold way. On his third voyage, in 1578, he sailed into Hudson Strait between the Canadian mainland and Baffin Island and ran into “a sudden and terrible tempest, whereby the ice began marvelously to gather about us.” Frobisher returned to Britain defeated. The Northwest Passage claimed its most famous victim in 1845 when Sir John Franklin and 134 men, in his ships Erebus and Terror, were spotted by the crew of a whaler entering Baffin Bay. They were never seen alive again. Finally, in 1906, Norwegian Roald Amundsen managed to sail right through. Learning from Franklin’s fatal error, he realized the Arctic regions could not support large crews, and accomplished the feat with just six companions in a small, 47-ton fishing boat. Since then only a few, specially strengthened ships have made it through the mighty ice barriers that block the route even in summer. That all may soon change, as the ice melts into an open, wind-swept sea.