



Lancaster Sound: Protecting one of the richest marine ecosystems in the Canadian Arctic

Summary:

CPAWS applauds the announcement this week that the Inuit, Nunavut Government, and the federal government have agreed to launch a feasibility study towards establishing a Parks Canada National Marine Conservation Area in Lancaster Sound.

Significance of Lancaster Sound:

Lancaster Sound is one of the richest marine environments in the Arctic, and the biological diversity and concentrations have been described as "...unequalled in the Canadian Arctic." It is the summer home for most of the world's narwhal population, 1/3 of North America's belugas and most of the endangered eastern population of bowhead whales. One of the highest densities of polar bears in Canada, along with enormous populations of seals and walrus inhabit the region. As many as one third of all Eastern Canadian colonial seabirds rely on Lancaster Sound to breed and feed. These mammals and seabirds feed on huge schools of Arctic cod.

The rich ecosystem in Lancaster Sound is a result of strong ocean currents and upwellings, as well as extensive year round ice-free areas (both polynyas, which are areas of open water surrounded by sea ice, and shore leads), which support biodiversity hotspots.

Threats to Lancaster Sound

As the eastern terminus of the Northwest Passage, Lancaster Sound will be subject to a variety of threats as the ice melts in response to the warming climate. Ship traffic will increase, along with risks of oil spills and other pollution and potential commercial fishing pressures. Securing Lancaster Sound as a marine conservation area will enable stronger environmental management, and reduce the risk of negative environmental impacts on this remarkable region.

Benefits of an NMCA

In addition to securing protection for the rich marine biodiversity of Lancaster Sound, a Parks Canada National Marine Conservation Area would support an enhanced ecotourism industry resulting in sustainable economic benefits for Arctic communities.

Conservation designations can also contribute to Arctic sovereignty goals by showing a strong Canadian presence in the region, along with staff, researchers and tourists.

History of protection efforts:

Through the 1970s, proposals for oil and gas exploration triggered public controversy because of the rich ecological values and sensitivity of Lancaster Sound, followed by an environmental assessment, a regional study, and a land use planning exercise. The Lancaster Sound Regional Study was the first attempt by the Government of Canada to initiate environmental planning in the Arctic, including public input by northerners. A proposal for a national park with a large marine component was first prepared in 1987, but the feasibility study was suspended on the request of the Inuit. Work resumed and led to the establishment in 1999 of Sirmilik National Park, protecting lands on Baffin Island adjacent to Lancaster Sound.

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Budget 2007 announced that the Government of Canada will establish 9 new marine protected areas, including Lancaster Sound. This commitment was re-iterated during the recent election. With land claims settled, and after the signing by Minister Baird in August 2008 of long outstanding Inuit Impact and Benefit Agreements (IIBA) for three new National Wildlife Areas, there were indications that Nunavut and the Inuit were interested in pursuing this proposal once again.

For more information:

Sabine Jessen, National Manager, Oceans and Great Freshwater Lakes Program, CPAWS
sabine@cpawsbc.org 604-657-2813
www.cpaws.org

