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What Future for the Arctic Ocean?

By Inès Hamila

What future do we want for the Arctic Ocean? This central question has been pondered around the Arctic by everyone, including policymakers, Indigenous leaders, scientists, and young people from across the region. A few months ago, I was in Levi near Kittilä in Finnish Lapland, where the EU Arctic Forum took place. The ski resort had been almost fully reserved for the event and it felt like an Arctic version of Davos. While we all grappled with the question of the future we wanted for the Arctic, I focused my attention on that which I know best, the Ocean. What

emerged from those conversations were urgent concerns around extractive pressures moving further north. One example is mining projects, both on land and at sea, driven by the EU's and other Arctic states' push for strategic independence through industrial expansion "at home". Another closely linked concern is food security, a term too often mobilized to justify the expansion of industrial fishing fleets that pillage the ocean at the expense of fish stocks, fragile ecosystems, and local small scale fishing communities. Here, I delve further into these extractive pressures, the public money that finances them, and what we, as citizens, international organizations, and governing entities, can push for in order to protect the ocean.

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Extractivism is moving north

Since joining the Arctic Mayors' Forum (AMF) mentorship program, I have had meaningful conversations with those for whom the Arctic is home, and listened to and participated in several conference panels on Arctic governance, the environment and energy. These interactions have made clear to me that the same extractive model which has decimated fragile ecosystems around the world, particularly in the Global South, in the name of development, progress and riches, is being pushed further north. As the ice retreats, areas once protected by their very remoteness now risk being opened up for industrial expansion and resource extraction. Strikingly, it is almost never the people who sustain and depend on these Arctic ecosystems, Indigenous communities, small-scale fishers, and Arctic youth, who get to set the terms. More often than not, they are invited to participate only once decisions are already underway. This "accumulation by dispossession[1]", through land and ocean grabbing processes, may at times even be conveniently framed as strategic projects needed for a "sustainable transition", as we see in current protests in Repparfjord over the Nussir copper mine, which in March 2025 was given special status as an EU strategic project due to its potential to contribute to the bloc's supply of copper.

The ocean is already under pressure

For the ocean, perhaps the most ominous of these industries is deep sea mining, which threatens Arctic waters and a vast ecosystem whose complexity we do not fully understand. Yet, companies and policymakers are already mapping our oceans as resource zones rather than recognizing them as a living ecosystem. Indeed, under the guise of "food security" or "food sovereignty", in Arctic and

[1] Harvey, David, 'Accumulation by Dispossession', *The New Imperialism* (Oxford, 2003; online edn, Oxford Academic, 12 Nov. 2020), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199264315.003.0007, accessed 15 Mar. 2026.

Arctic-adjacent waters, industrial bottom trawling is already occurring. This does not involve small coastal boats, but rather large industrial trawlers which drag heavy metal gear across the seabed. The result can be devastating, destroying habitats that have taken centuries to form, capturing juvenile fish before they can reproduce, and disturbing the carbon stored in the seafloor. Research published in *Science* shows that bottom trawling releases around 370 million tons of CO_2 into the atmosphere every year, which is twice the annual emissions from fuel combustion for the entire world fishing fleet[2]. The end result looks a lot less like fishing and more like the bulldozing of marine ecosystems.

If you've attended any international environmental or biodiversity conference, you'll recognize this familiar message being repeated: industries and conservation can coexist. But how can that be true when bottom trawling is allowed inside marine protected areas? If destructive fishing is still permitted in MPAs, then in reality these areas are not protected. In this case, the label of protected area is just another example of greenwashing, which begs the question: will deep sea mining enterprises as well be allowed to operate in such fragile ecosystems?

[2] Sala, E. et al. (2021). Protecting the global ocean for biodiversity, food and climate. *Science*, 371(6530), 1166–1171. Available at: https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abm1680.

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Public money is financing destruction

If extractive pressures are moving further north, then we must also ask who is financing them. We must question the use of public money to finance the destruction of ecosystems and local communities. Since the early 1990s, scientists, fisheries experts and international organizations have consistently highlighted how public subsidies[3] contribute to both the overcapacity of fishing fleets and the overexploitation of fish stocks.[4] By artificially increasing production capacity and sustaining certain segments of the fleet that would otherwise be unprofitable, these

[3] According to Article 1 of the WTO Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures, a subsidy exists where a government provides a financial contribution (such as grants, loans, equity infusions, tax exemptions, or the provision of goods and services) or any form of income or price support, and a benefit is thereby conferred. See: WTO, Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures, Article 1, https://www.wto.org/english/docs_e/legal_e/24-scm.pdf

[4] FAO, Marine fisheries and the law of the sea: a decade of change. Special chapter (revised) of The State of Food and Agriculture 1992, Rome, 1993. Available at: https://www.fao.org/4/u9345e/u9345e00.htm

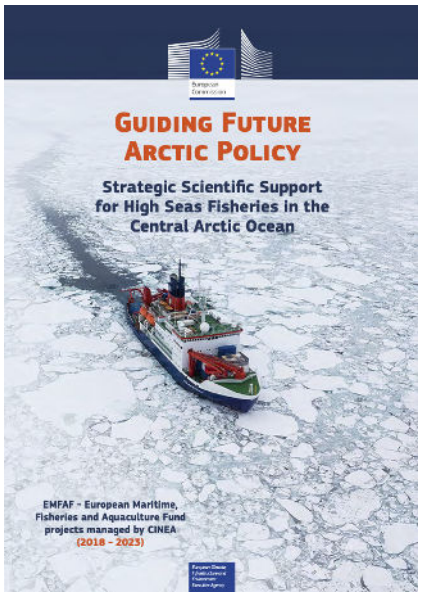
subsidies have encouraged a continuous race for more catches, even as marine resources decline to levels that should have triggered restraint.[5] Over the last twenty years, the EU allocated more than 29 billion euros in public funding under the EU fisheries funds.[6] Between 40 and 50 percent of this went to capacity-enhancing measures that increased the ability to catch fish.[7] At the same time, the EU fishing fleet benefited from a long-standing fossil fuel tax exemption under the Energy Taxation Directive (ETD), estimated to represent between 800 million and 15.7 billion euros between 2010 and 2020.[8] This financial framework has systematically favoured industrial fishing vessels[9], which represent no more than 24 percent of the fleet but operate with some of the most energy-intensive and environmentally destructive techniques[10], including bottom trawling. One kilo of fish caught by bottom trawling can receive up to 75 cents in subsidies, while passive gear, which is more selective and far less damaging, receives less than 30 cents per kilo[11]. Small-scale fishers, who make up 76 percent of the fleet[12], received only 20 percent of EU maritime funds up to 2021.[13] Yet this segment contributes more jobs

[5] Sumaila Ussif Rashid et al., "Updated estimates and analysis of global fisheries subsidies", Marine Policy, 109, November 2019, Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/ article/pii/S0308597X19303677
[6] Skerritt Daniel J. et al., "A 20-year retrospective on the provision of fisheries subsidies in the European Union", ICES Journal of Marine Science, Volume 77, Issue 7-8, December 2020, Pages 2741–2752, https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsaa142
[7] Ibid.
[8] Our Fish and ClientEarth, Better use of public money: The end of fuel subsidies for the EU fishing industry, 2023. Available at: https://our.fish/publications/report-better-use-ofpublic-money-the-end-of-fuel-subsidies-for-the-fishing-industry/
[9] "industrial fishing vessel" is to be understood as any vessel that does not fall into the definition in Article 2(1) of Council Regulation (EC) No 1967/2006. Therefore, an "industrial fishing vessel" is a "fishing vessel of an overall length of more than twelve meters using any towed gears as defined in Article 2(1) of Council Regulation (EC) No 1967/2006".
[10] European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) - The 2024 Annual Economic Report on the EU Fishing Fleet (STECF-24-03 & STECF-24-07), Luxembourg, 2024, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/5037826
[11] BLOOM, The Shift Project, L'Institut Agro, AgroParisTech, L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, L'Atelier des Jours à Venir, Time for a U-Turn, Paris, May 2024. Available at: https://bloomassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Time-for-a-U-Turn.pdf
[12] European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) - The 2024 Annual Economic Report on the EU Fishing Fleet (STECF-24-03 & STECF-24-07), op.cit.
[13] BirdLife, ClientEarth, Low Impact Fishers of Europe, Seas at Risk, WWF, Splash out (the right way): 15 Recommendations for spending the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF). How Member States can adopt FAIR operational programmes for the new EMFAF, Brussels, November 2021, p.4. Available at: https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/15-recommendations-for-spending-the-european-maritime-fisheries-and-aquaculture-fund-emfaf/; ClientEarth, The post-2020 European Maritime and Fisheries Fund: how to ensure that EU financial aid serves the objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy?, Brussels, July 2018, p.16. Available at:

per tonne landed, generates higher added value, and operates with lower ecological pressure.[14] The cumulative effect of these funding choices has created a situation where public money continues to support a model that contradicts the EU's stated sustainability, conservation, social equity, and climate action objectives.

Public money should not be used to support this destruction. It should go to those who actually protect the ocean. If Arctic communities are to benefit from ocean industries, then the first step is to fund the right activities. That means supporting small-scale, low-impact fisheries that already show us how to live in balance with the ocean, rather than prioritizing industrial fleets and corporate profits.

The Central Arctic Ocean shows restraint is possible



The Central Arctic Ocean is an important test case for how an international agreement, the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (CAOFA), can impose restraint on resource extraction. This region has extremely low biomass, limited zooplankton, and scarce higher trophic species, making it unsuitable for commercial fishing[15]. These discoveries were only possible because of EU-funded research under the EFICA consortium, presented in the CINEA publication *Guiding Future Arctic Policy: EU Research in the Central Arctic Ocean* (June 2024). For now, the CAOFA establishes

https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/the-post-2020-european-maritime-and-fisheries-fund-how-to-ensure-that-eu-financial-aid-serves-the-objectives-of-the-common-fisheries-policy/

[14] BLOOM, The Shift Project, L'Institut Agro, AgroParisTech, L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, L'Atelier des Jours à Venir, Time for a U-Turn, Paris, May 2024. Available at: https://bloomassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Time-for-a-U-Turn.pdf

[15] CINEA (2024). *Guiding Future Arctic Policy: EU Research in the Central Arctic Ocean*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. June 2024. Available at: https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/publications/digital-publications/guiding-future-arctic-policy_en

a moratorium on unregulated commercial fishing in the high seas of the Central Arctic Ocean, which will remain in place until at least 2037. When it expires, the EU should not only renew it but lead the call for a permanent ban on commercial fishing in this fragile region.

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Who gets to decide? Choosing a different future

The science is clear and the risks are real for the future of the Arctic Ocean. If Arctic communities are to thrive, we need to stop asking how to make exploitation cleaner and instead ask what kind of a future we want.

I believe we should seek a future in which public money supports those who care for the ocean rather than those who degrade it, a future where the Arctic Ocean is

recognized as a living system and not a resource to be stripped, and a future where local communities, Indigenous peoples, and Arctic youth are at the center of decision-making.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Inès Hamila is currently a mentee in the Arctic Mayors' Forum Mentorship Program, which is part of the Youth Together for Arctic Futures project led by WWF and funded by the European Union. Over the past year and a half she has met with other youth from across the Arctic, exchanged with mentors, and participated in gatherings such as the Arctic Youth Dialogue, the EU Arctic Forum, and the Indigenous Peoples' Dialogue. These spaces created a rare opportunity for youth to be included in discussions that too often happen without them. They also made her reflect on the future of the Arctic Ocean and the urgent need to protect it.

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