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Climate Stories: The Arctic is Melting

The arctic ice is melting faster than ever. While climate scientists fear a runaway greenhouse effect, politicians are fighting over oil and other resources locked away in the arctic seabed.



Arctic Ice Receding (click to enlarge)

September 2007 brought record sea ice melt in the Arctic. Sea ice extent was 38 percent below average and 24 percent below the 2005 record (Graphic: NASA)

“The Arctic is screaming,” warned Mark Serreze, senior scientist at the U.S. National Snow and Ice Data Center, after he observed that Arctic ice cover stood at its lowest-ever recorded levels in the summer of 2007. Satellite imagery taken in early September showed that the Arctic ice cover had receded massively. Greenland’s ice sheet, for example, lost nearly 19 billion tons more ice than in the previous record year 2006.

The meltdown is extremely unsettling, because polar regions are so-called tipping points: the impacts of climate change will make fundamental changes that propel further warming. As the Arctic’s reflective snow and ice cover recedes, the dark-colored ocean absorbs more and more heat from the sun’s rays making the Arctic the fastest-warming area on the planet.



Picture Gallery (click the image to start)

The Arctic is melting. See what this means for its people, nations and nature.

The Arctic could lose all of its ice by 2030, warned Serreze. The impact on wildlife that relies on the ice, notably the polar bear, could be catastrophic. Further, melting ice means rising sea levels and warmer waters, which could spell disaster for coastal regions and ecosystems around the world.

There is a problematic political dimension to the shrinking polar ice, as well. The loss of summer ice in the waters north of Canada has made the famous Northwest Passage passable. The passage, a sea route through the Arctic Ocean, connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and is by thousands of miles shorter than current routes further south. While Canada claims the route to be internal waters,

the United States and the European Union call it an international transit route and demand free passage.

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Even more contentious is ownership of the North Pole itself. As its ice melts, northern nations are scrambling for the Arctic, hoping to find vast reserves of oil and gas under the seabed. So far, Russia, Canada, the U.S., and Denmark have tried to stake their claims. Russia even went as far as planting a Russian flag on the seabed below the North Pole.

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