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Controversy over Seismic Tests in Canadian Arctic

August 12, 2010 - On August 8, 2010 a Nunavut judge granted an injunction that blocks a seismic study scheduled for the eastern Canadian arctic, including Lancaster Sound. The sound, located at the eastern entrance of the Northwest Passage, is considered to be one of the richest marine mammal areas in the world and serves as an important migratory route for animals ranging from narwhals and seals to beluga and bowhead whales. In fact, in December 2009, Federal Environment Minister Jim Prentice and Federal Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq announced a \$5 million feasibility study for the planned creation of a National Marine Conservation Area to be led by Parks Canada.

In spring 2010, officials from the Geological Survey of Canada, a division of Natural Resources Canada, announced they were working to gain approval for a summer research expedition called the Eastern Canadian Arctic Seismic Experiment. In collaboration with German colleagues, federal scientists were set to conduct a seismic seabed survey of the area as part of a five year, \$100 million northern Geo-mapping for Energy and Minerals (GEM) Program announced in August 2008 by Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

The current controversy arose over the fact that oil and gas development is prohibited by federal legislation governing marine conservation areas. In fact, these areas are protected from ocean dumping, undersea mining, energy exploration and overfishing. It also didn't help that the people of Nunavut were never consulted about the tests required as part of the GEM project. So it came as no surprise when Inuit hunters, environmentalists and community members raised their concerns with the Nunavut Impact Review Board (NIRB) about the impact of such a survey and the potential for industrial development around such sensitive breeding grounds and migratory routes.

In May 2010, the NIRB approved the planned federal expedition as long as certain conditions were met. The stipulations included better coordination between Natural Resources Canada and Parks Canada, as well as a requirement for a round of consultations with the 5 affected communities in the area (Pond Inlet, Arctic Bay, Grise Fiord, Resolute Bay and Clyde River). Additional measures were to be taken to protect the marine environment, including: following Fisheries and Oceans Canada's seismic noise reduction guidelines; increasing the mammal safety zone around the ship to 1,000 metres; and ensuring that 2 marine wildlife monitors were on duty at all times.

After meetings were held across the region in June and July 2010, federal officials announced they would be changing their research plans in response to the concerns raised by community members. They began looking into alternative surveying methods, such as the use of satellite imagery. But by August, the Qikiqtani Inuit Association (which represents the interests of the Inuit of the Baffin Region, High Arctic and Belcher Islands) had filed for an injunction to stop the upcoming tests in and around Lancaster Sound.

Caught in the middle of this controversy has been the German organization, the Alfred Wegener Institute, collaborators in the study. An Institute scientist has gone on record stating that the tests concerned distant geologic history and had no connection to oil and gas exploration. The focus was to explore the present configuration of continental land masses in the North Atlantic and Baffin Bay using low-resolution technology on the crusts's deep layers. The scientists were to be at work for just two days in Lancaster Sound out of the scheduled 55-day seismic testing project in the eastern Canadian arctic.

The problem is that Natural Resources Canada's own website contradicts this assertion. Regarding the GEM program, it clearly states that "geoscience information [is] necessary to guide investment decisions leading to the discovery and development of new energy and mineral resources" (Natural Resources Canada, 2010). It goes on to say that "[i]n large areas of the North, there is insufficient public geoscience information to attract and guide effective private sector investment...[and] the need is particularly acute in Nunavut" (Natural Resources Canada, 2010). Finally, "[GEM will]...contribute to the creation and retention of prosperity and well-being in Canada's North" (Natural Resources Canada, 2010).

Sunday's ruling by Madam Justice Sue Cooper means that the seismic tests slated for the eastern Canadian arctic are now on hold. The federal government now has to decide whether it will appeal the decision, continue with consultations or abandon the entire project.

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