

Tougher rules urged to protect Arctic

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The Arctic could face “irreparable damage” unless tougher rules are made to curb the scramble by world powers for the region’s resources, a leading international environmental group has warned.

WWF – formerly the World Wildlife Fund – called for an Arctic treaty or other multilateral agreement to prevent conflict and help the region survive the severe impact of climate change.

The melting of the Arctic ice-caps is opening up new opportunities for oil exploration and shipping, raising fears that territorial disputes between states such as Russia, Canada and the US could run out of control.

WWF said it believed that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea – the main source of international marine territorial law – was inadequate for ensuring orderly management of the Arctic.

“We urgently need sound international co-operation between Arctic nations to guarantee that the region’s development is sustainable,” said Neil Hamilton, WWF Arctic programme director.

The group wants a multilateral deal such as a regional treaty, echoing the decades-old Antarctic Treaty System aimed at demilitarisation, quelling territorial disputes and promoting international scientific co-operation.

It claims the race to exploit the Arctic’s estimated hundreds of billions of barrels of oil equivalent – a measure that includes both oil and gas – will dramatically increase global warming in a region already suffering badly from it.

Arctic sea ice shrank last week to the lowest extent ever recorded by satellite, according to scientists at the US National Snow and Ice Data Center in Boulder, Colorado.

Julienne Stroeve, an NSIDC scientist, said she believed the sea ice was reaching a “critical threshold” of thickness beyond which it could no longer survive the summer melt season. This meant the region could be ice-free in summer in the next 10 to 20 years.

The political temperature in the Arctic has risen sharply this month after a Russian expedition dropped a titanium flag on the seabed, bringing into renewed focus the region’s many contested territorial rights.

Lawyers say potential mechanisms for dispute resolution exist under the UN convention, although they add that the numbers and intricacy of claims and counter-claims could test the ability of existing laws to cope.

“What’s happening in the Arctic now is probably the most complex boundary situation you can ever come across,” says Charlotte Breide, solicitor at Ince & Co, the London-based law firm.

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