

Polar Code too weak to properly protect polar environments from increased shipping activity

November 25 2014, by Dave Walsh

Responding to today's adoption by the International Maritime Organisation of the long-awaited Polar Code, aimed at regulating shipping in Polar Regions, a coalition of environmental groups criticised the measures for not going far enough to adequately protect the fragile Arctic and Antarctic environments.

While the new code is a positive step forward- for the first time there will be mandatory rules for management of shipping in Arctic and Antarctic polar waters – it is insufficient to properly protect Polar environments from the increased levels of shipping activity that are anticipated as sea ice recedes in the face of global warming.

In Arctic waters, the Polar Code fails to address the need to phase out the use of heavy fuel oil (HFO); an HFO spill has been identified as the highest risk posed by shipping. HFO was previously already banned in Antarctica for this reason.

The Code will contain regulations requiring that ship operators limit entry into ice according to the ability of their ship to resist ice pressure, but major concerns remain due to the fact that non-ice strengthened [ships](#) will still be allowed to operate in ice covered waters.

Of further concern is the impact of shipping on [wildlife](#). While the Code includes requirements for ships to avoid marine mammals such as whales

and walruses, it fails to consider seabird colonies, despite the fact that the Arctic and Antarctic coastlines contain some of the most significant bird colonies in the world.

The Polar Code is due to enter into force on 1st January 2017, with further negotiation on pollution prevention and other vessels (including fishing vessels) taking place in May 2015 and 2016 respectively.

"We have concerns that lessons are not being learned from recent shipping incidents, and Polar Code's adoption will do little to reduce risks to the Antarctic [environment](#)", says Sian Prior, shipping Advisor to the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition. "The Polar Code should demand that ships sailing in Antarctic waters are adequately strengthened and stabilised for dealing with ice collisions, that they report their positions on a regular basis to a centralised system, and that they are routed away from important wildlife sites, such as bird nesting colonies, unless strict wildlife watching protocols are enforced."

John Maggs, President of the Clean Shipping Coalition, Senior Policy Advisor Seas At Risk says, "The purpose of developing the Polar Code was to make sure that increased Polar shipping activity as a result of climate change did not put lives and the environment at risk. Sadly, the negotiations have resulted in a Code that falls far short of what is required. Without urgent further strengthening, it is just a question of when, not if, an incident occurs, with serious consequences for the delicate Arctic and Antarctic environments."

John Kaltenstein, Marine Policy Analyst with Friends of the Earth U.S., says, "The Polar Code doesn't do nearly enough to tackle substantial risks posed by shipping: use of noxious heavy fuel oil in the Arctic, vessels operating with inadequate ice-strengthening and structural stability, and disturbances of wildlife, to name a few. The IMO and industry seem content to dismiss or put off discussion on issues that

really matter – that would truly diminish shipping's impacts on the sensitive Arctic environment and the region's residents."

Sue Libenson, Pacific Environment says, "Arctic communities are especially dependent on marine resources for food. While the Polar Code is a good step at recognizing the special risks of Arctic shipping, it still fails to directly address the highest potential risk of a heavy fuel oil spill".

Provided by Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition

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