

Straining to hear the Arctic voice

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Despite Greenpeace's recent attempts to align their Arctic campaign with indigenous peoples such as the Inuit, their new 'global survey' on Arctic industrial development continues their pattern of discounting the Arctic voice.

'The world has spoken!' So [proclaimed Greenpeace](#) just over a week ago, when they published the [results of a 'global survey'](#) on attitudes towards industrial development in the Arctic. The survey showed seemingly impressive support for an Arctic free from oil drilling and 'industrial-scale' fishing. Especially satisfying for Greenpeace was the support shown for their own [call for a marine sanctuary](#) putting the northernmost waters of the Arctic Ocean off-limits to industry.

Nearly three quarters of respondents, representing 30 countries and territories around the world, agreed that 'governments should create a protected area in the Arctic Ocean around the North Pole, providing a sanctuary for animals and other marine life'. Over 70 per cent also agreed that 'the Arctic Ocean should be free from', rather than 'opened up for', oil drilling and other heavy industry. 'With such broad support,' asked Greenpeace, 'what are governments waiting for?'

The idea of an international sanctuary in the central Arctic Ocean has real merit, especially [to prevent overfishing](#). But the support shown for it in Greenpeace's survey was hardly global. Most countries represented were Western, rich or both—and China with its oil- and fish-hungry 1.4 billion people was conspicuously absent. Other populous but missing countries included Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Mexico and Egypt. Moreover, the [clever but narrow survey method](#) limited respondents to Internet users who could be captured and redirected after mistyping URLs directly into their browsers.

Nevertheless, a very large percentage of some group—perhaps an Internet-savvy, middle-class to wealthy, Western or Westernising, non-Chinese group, but at least *some* group—wants governments to enact something like Greenpeace's Arctic sanctuary. Curiously, however, less than two thirds of respondents agreed

that ‘oil drilling, oil transport and industrial-scale fishing should be banned’ from this sanctuary. This suggests that over one third think that, sanctuary or no, a balance between environment and development should be struck in the Arctic. Even more curiously, fully half of respondents ‘trust that oil companies have the necessary capacity and technology to clean up a major spill in the Arctic’. Greenpeace chose not to underscore these contrary results.

So despite the hyperbole, Greenpeace’s survey doesn’t quite amount to a resounding cry from all corners of the earth for an Arctic free from oil drilling and commercial fishing. But it does point clearly—if unsurprisingly—to a widespread concern for the Arctic environment. It’s also a laudable attempt by Greenpeace to seek the views of the global public in whose name they purport to act. Yet in itself that points to a more serious flaw in the survey—Greenpeace’s corresponding lack of attention to the views of people who actually live in, and make a living from, the Arctic.

Now, as Greenpeace would surely object, their Arctic sanctuary is meant to protect the [international waters of the Arctic Ocean](#) beyond the 200-nautical mile limit of Arctic state jurisdiction. These waters—though not necessarily [the seabed beneath them](#)—are the common heritage of humanity, not the special patrimony of Arctic peoples. The global voice in general, not the Arctic voice in particular, should speak loudest there.

But this is doubtful thinking. Whilst it’s fair that global civil society should have a say in the debate about how to govern the Arctic high seas, the people who live nearby deserve to be heard above the din. The countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea would rightly complain were the global community to discount their views on [high seas governance there](#), or subordinate them to the views of distant countries with few or no geographic or historic ties.

What’s more, Greenpeace themselves often blur the lines between the international waters of the Arctic Ocean, and waters within the jurisdiction of Arctic states. In only one of the four questions in their survey did they ask specifically about international waters, and in two questions they seemed clearly to mean Arctic waters in general. This can hardly be dismissed as mere oversight, since Greenpeace activists have tried physically to blockade offshore oil drilling [almost everywhere it occurs](#) within Arctic state jurisdiction.

Perhaps conscious of such distinctions, survey respondents from Arctic states were on the whole somewhat less convinced by Greenpeace’s proposed bans.

This is obscured by the presentation of the survey, since the ‘global averages’ shown—which Greenpeace attributed to ‘the world’—are weighted by the size of a country’s adult population. This means that responses from non-Arctic population heavyweights such as India massively skewed the results. It also means that responses from small Arctic countries such as Greenland and Iceland were almost totally drowned out.

The following table coaxes out the Arctic voice. Even so, it most likely overstates support from Arctic states, since it almost certainly reflects the views of the vast majority of Arctic state citizens who don’t actually live in the Arctic itself. The original responses from Greenland and Iceland probably indicate best what Greenpeace might have found had they limited their survey to Arctic citizens.

RIWI GREENPEACE ARCTIC SURVEY 2014 (POLAR ASPECT ANALYSIS)

	'Global Average'	Arctic State Average*	Greenland**	Iceland
Q1: Which statement do you most agree with?				
The Arctic Ocean should be free from oil drilling and other types of heavy industry	71%	60%	53%	51%
The Arctic Ocean should be opened up for oil drilling and other types of heavy industry	29%	40%	47%	49%
Q2: Governments should create a protected area in the Arctic Ocean around the North Pole, providing a sanctuary for animals and other marine life.				
Strongly agree	38%	34%	33%	31%
Agree	36%	38%	30%	36%
Disagree	11%	13%	13%	15%
Strongly disagree	6%	6%	4%	9%
Don't know	9%	9%	20%	9%
Q3: Oil drilling, oil transport and industrial-scale fishing should be banned in the international waters of the Arctic Ocean around the North Pole.				
Strongly agree	31%	24%	26%	21%
Agree	33%	31%	19%	25%
Disagree	16%	22%	16%	24%
Strongly disagree	8%	10%	27%	15%
Don't know	12%	13%	12%	15%
Q4: Which statement do you most agree with?				
I trust that oil companies have the necessary capacity and technology to clean up a major oil spill in the Arctic.	51%	58%	46%	47%
I believe that oil companies do not have the necessary capacity and technology to clean up a major oil spill in the Arctic.	49%	42%	54%	53%

*Average of responses from Canada, Denmark (including Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia and USA, weighted by population living in the Arctic (*Arctic Human Development Report*, 2004, p 18)
 **Small sample size

Now, it’s [no discovery](#) that Arctic peoples aren’t wholeheartedly in favour of industrial development in their fragile and beautiful homeland. Indeed, insofar as their voices can be heard through the survey at all, they appear deeply conflicted about it—at once hopeful about the benefits and wary of the costs. But this nuanced story doesn’t make a headline that Greenpeace can crow about—and they apparently felt no responsibility to tell it. The ‘global voice’ agreed

rather more with Greenpeace's preconceptions about the Arctic, and they seem to have been happy to lend it the megaphone instead.

All of this might matter less were it not part of a disappointing pattern. As I've [argued elsewhere](#), in their enthusiasm to 'save the Arctic', Greenpeace have tended to treat it as though it were devoid of people. Their uncompromising attitude [betrays a special insensitivity](#) to Arctic indigenous peoples, many of whom have fought hard for their rights to benefit from industrial development—including from offshore oil drilling and commercial fishing. Inuit in particular resent what they see as unsolicited interference, and they've [likened today's campaign](#) to 'save the Arctic' to Greenpeace's early campaign to 'save the seals', which plunged Inuit into poverty and permanently crippled their self-reliant hunting culture.

To their credit, Greenpeace have [recently apologised](#) for the harmful effects of the seal campaign, and they've publicly supported Inuit [sealing](#) and [whaling](#)—at least of a 'traditional subsistence' variety. This summer, the Inuit community of Clyde River even took the bold step of [inviting Greenpeace](#) to join them in opposing a plan to map Baffin Bay's hydrocarbon potential by seismic survey, which Clyde hunters fear may drive off or injure seals and whales. Citing the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), Greenpeace was quick to [chastise the Canadian government](#) for ignoring the voice of Inuit by permitting the plan without their '[free, prior and informed consent](#)'.

In a battle such as this, the Clyde Inuit couldn't wish for a mightier ally. Greenpeace should be applauded for throwing their considerable weight behind an international principle of indigenous justice that has too often [gotten short shrift](#) from environmental organisations and governments alike. All the same, many Inuit understandably doubt the fervour of Greenpeace's conversion.

The apology for the seal campaign is [nothing new](#)—and when Greenpeace first toured Greenland in 1985 to express regret, Greenlandic Inuit received them with banners reading 'Greenshit'. The [same banners flew](#) in 2010, when Greenpeace returned to Greenland to explain their plans to interdict oil exploration on the Greenlandic side of Baffin Bay—exploration that arguably had the [free, prior and informed consent](#) of Inuit through Greenland's self-rule government. And as part of their 'save the Arctic' campaign, Greenpeace continues to tout a '[Joint Statement of Indigenous Solidarity for Arctic Protection](#)', which Inuit leaders [angrily rejected](#) as an attempt to appropriate their voice.

No doubt with such offenses in mind, Leona Aglukkaq—Canada’s Minister for the North and herself an Inuk—[baldly accused](#) Greenpeace of using the Clyde Inuit for their own ends. Such undiplomatic rhetoric might seem well over the top—especially considering that Clyde River’s leaders [felt badly let down](#) by Aglukkaq herself. But when Greenpeace follows its past missteps by trumpeting a slanted survey showing that ‘the world has spoken’ on banning development in the Arctic—and without so much as a nod to the very different views Inuit [have declared on the matter](#)—it’s hard not to wonder. Just whose voice does Greenpeace really care to listen to?

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