
Earthlog

By Fred Pearce

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A weekly column taking an inside look at the environment, by Fred Pearce

Climate change irony

Suddenly, everyone wants a share of the Arctic. And all because climate change is removing the ice and making drilling for oil feasible. I hardly need to underline the irony of that. But I am just amazed that there are such large chunks of the planet left that have not been claimed. Where else?

Russia began the "scramble for the Arctic" recently by digging up a rule in the 1982 UN Law of the Sea that says countries can claim oil and minerals in any continental shelves that extended from their shores.

The Kremlin's cartographers noticed that, though Siberia is nearly 2000 kilometres from the North Pole, a narrow isthmus of continental shelf called the Lomonosov Ridge extends all the way to the pole. Ergo the ridge, and with it the North Pole and a great deal of submarine riches, is theirs.

They may claim they have just discovered all this, but I found the ridge clearly marked in my old school atlas. There is a problem, however. The ridge doesn't stop at the North Pole. It goes all the way across the Arctic and joins up with Canada and Greenland, which are both rather closer to the pole.

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Hence the angry cries and scrambling of scientific expeditions by the Canadians and Danes. The Danes? I like stories like this because they reveal things you never realised you needed to know.

It turns out that despite granting Greenland home rule back in 1979 (the Greenlanders' first significant act, incidentally, was to leave the EU), the Danes still claim the world's largest island as part of the Kingdom of Denmark.

Stand by for ice-breaker diplomacy. Or maybe Hamlet.

There is a nice irony, incidentally, in the predicament of the US, here. It too could reasonably stake a claim, based on the continent-shelf rule. Except that, oh dear, Ronnie Reagan never got round to signing up to the Law of the Sea. So Washington's lawyers will have their work cut out invoking its rules.

We Brits are out of the game entirely. Once we were great flag-planters, but our only outstanding territorial claim these days is to the waters around Rockall, a lump of rock 30 metres across and barely a third of the way to Iceland.

Of course, the Arctic should be handed over to the Inuit. But they don't have their own country. So next best would be to make it an international treaty area, like the Antarctic. There is a precedent with the Arctic islands of Svalbard (including Spitzbergen).

Under a 1920 treaty, they are administered by the Norwegians but grant allcomers "equal liberty of access and entry

for any reason or object whatever". Luckily, nobody has told bin Laden about this yet. But meanwhile, the Russians are already mining coal up there.

Old (tunnel) news

Some papers (well, in Britain The Guardian) reported last weekend that the Iranians claimed to have found a tunnel under the British embassy in Tehran that the Brits used to bring in "spies and prostitutes".

The embassy denied all knowledge, but what neither side seems to have spotted is that subterranean passageways into the embassy are a matter of historical record.

Tehran is riddled with dozens of exquisitely constructed tunnels dug centuries ago to bring water from the mountains. Some are tens of kilometres long. They are called qanats. One of them discharged into the embassy grounds and supplied the place with water until the 1930s. I suggest there is little doubt that this is what the Iranians "discovered".

Tipping point on the horizon

Wearing my New Scientist hat, I was the only journalist at a conference in Cambridge on Monday on "complexity" in climate science. Three days later, the papers finally caught up with the story about how the Greenland ice sheet might be on the verge of collapse, [threatening a 22-foot rise in sea levels](/earth/main.jhtml?xml=/earth/2007/08/16/eaiice116.xml) (/earth/main.jhtml?xml=/earth/2007/08/16/eaiice116.xml) .

It's scary stuff, but the main topic of the meeting was why nature in general, and climate in particular, is too complex to capture in even the biggest statistical models.

Lenny Smith of the London School of Economics was the pithiest. Resorting to a political lexicon, he said the models were "not fit for purpose" because the real world contained "too many unknown unknowns".

Good news for climate sceptics? Not so fast. Most of the boffins felt the models were too sanguine, not too alarmist. The Greenland ice collapse is just one climate "tipping point" they see ahead.

Lesson 1: Climatology, like economics, is an inexact science. The only certainty is that the predictions will be wrong.
Lessons 2: the IPCC, with its dogged pursuit of bogus certainty, should probably be pensioned off.

- **Charles Clover is away. Fred Pearce is author of Confessions of an Eco-Sinner, to be published next spring.**

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