



The Sound and the fury

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When William Baffin sailed past the entrance to a broad channel north of the island that now bears his name, little did the intrepid English navigator realize that it was the gateway to the very thing he was looking for: the fabled northwest passage to the riches of the Far East.

Four hundred years later, another European ship is headed for Lancaster Sound. It, too, is on a voyage of discovery, one designed to advance not only scientific knowledge but the cause of Canadian sovereignty.

The German research vessel Polarstern (Polar Star) has been enlisted by Natural Resources Canada (NRC) to conduct seismic testing of the Arctic seabed. Over the next two months, it will crisscross 5,500 kilometres, nearly 400 kilometres of it in the sound, collecting data and gaining a better understanding of what lies beneath the ocean floor.

At the same time, hundreds of kilometres to the west, Canadian scientists are working with counterparts from the United States on a similar mapping project. Two coast guard icebreakers, one from each nation, are exploring 21,000 square kilometres of the Beaufort Sea in a bid to settle once and for all where Alaska ends and the Northwest Territories begin.



And last week the flagship of Russia's polar fleet, the Academician Feodorov, left port in Archangel to spend 100 days conducting geological and seismological studies between Siberia and the North Pole as part of Moscow's drive to expand its territorial waters.

With just three years before the deadline set out by the United Nations Law of the Sea, the race to claim what lies below the ocean is clearly approaching the finish line.

Long a subject of heated debate, northern sovereignty has been especially touchy since the polar ice began to melt, making the Northwest Passage a potential conduit for international shipping. Which is why it was no laughing matter three years ago when the Academician Feodorov reached the North Pole and sent down a submersible carrying the deputy speaker of Russia's parliament to plant a flag on the bottom.

Yet the fight for national supremacy isn't why people who live in the path of the Polarstern went to court this week

SERENGETI OF THE ARCTIC

Lined with steep ice-covered mountains and deep fjords, Lancaster Sound lies between Baffin Island and Devon Island, covering 40,000 square kilometres, more than twice the area of Lake Ontario.

Seemingly desolate to the untrained eye, it is, in fact, home to an unusual abundance of wildlife. Extensive polynyas - stretches of open water surrounded by sea ice - make the area so creature-friendly that it has come to be known as the Arctic Serengeti, inhabited by most of the world's narwhals and one-third of North America's belugas, as well as massive bowhead whales, an array of seals (ringed, bearded and harp), walruses, thick-billed murres (cousins of the long-vanished great auk) and one of the highest densities of polar bears in Canada.

This natural bounty has long sustained the Inuit, who look at the \$200 the Northern Store charges for a turkey no bigger than a soccer ball and worry about what impact the testing will have on their traditional source of food.

The Polarstern will drag air guns in its wake and measure what happens to the sound waves they blast out every 60 seconds. Hunters says all this noise is bound to drive off the animals, and this week, the Qikiqtani Inuit Association, which represents residents of Arctic Bay, Pond Inlet, Clyde River, Resolute Bay and Grise Fiord, petitioned the Nunavut Court of Justice to call the whole thing off.

The move has drawn support from a surprising source - environmentalists, who rarely see eye to eye with hunters, says Chris Debicki, who works in Iqaluit with Oceans North Canada, a branch of the U.S.-based

Pew Environment Group. But they also oppose the testing, both in the short run and because of what it could lead to down the road: drilling for underwater petroleum and the prospect of a spill like the one that sent an estimated 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

If history is any indication, there is cause for concern. Four decades ago, a crew looking for gas on Melville Island, more than 400 kilometres west of Lancaster Sound, sparked a blowout that lasted 485 days - five times what it took to contain the gulf spill.

A year later, perhaps the largest blowout Canada has seen took place north of Melville on tiny King Christian Island. The gas ignited, fried the drilling rig and created an 85-metre-high column of flame that burned for three months and could be seen from the air hundreds of kilometres away.

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