

News focus

Fears over Arctic research plans

A new polar research effort is raising concerns that it may bolster fossil fuel extraction and increasingly threaten many local species. **Nigel Williams** reports.

An increasing number of researchers are concerned about a controversial plan by US colleagues to work alongside oil companies to hunt for fossil fuel reserves in the Arctic. The US Geological Survey is lining up a project with BP and Statoil to find oil and gas in the Arctic Ocean, under the auspices of a flagship scientific initiative intended to tackle global warming.

Tackling climate change and working out how it will affect the Arctic and Antarctic is a central theme of International Polar Year (IPY) — a high-profile project to start next spring that involves thousands of scientists from 60 countries.

The Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the planet and

last September saw the lowest extent of sea ice cover for more than a century. Scientists say that the temperature there could rise by a further 4–7°C by 2100, and the Arctic Ocean could be ice free in summer by 2060.

Documents on the IPY website show that BP and Statoil, a Norwegian company, are significant consortium members on a USGS proposal to assess “energy resources in the circumarctic area including oil, gas, coalbed methane and methane hydrates”. Geologists estimate that a quarter of the world’s undiscovered oil and gas reserves lie under the Arctic, and analysts have predicted a 21st-century goldrush to tap them as the Arctic Ocean’s ice cover retreats.

Launching the polar initiative last month, Chris Rapely, director of the British Antarctic Survey, said that scientists would work on projects “that will tackle the urgent environmental issues” because “rapid climate change is already impacting local peoples... and it is only a question of time before the wider consequences become apparent”.

The Inuit people have filed a lawsuit against the US government claiming that greenhouse gas pollution is damaging their livelihoods. Experts have warned the only realistic way to prevent dangerous climate change is to curb carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels.

Unlike the Antarctic continent, spread around the South Pole, the Arctic has no formal international treaty to regulate activities. And, while inclement conditions for



Dwindling: The polar ice cover is receding, opening up oceans to fossil fuel prospecting to the alarm of many researchers. (Photo: Peter Menzel/Science Photo Library.)



At sea: A signature Arctic species, the walrus, is under growing threat from summer fragmentation of sea ice. (Photo: Daniel Cox/Photolibrary.)

most of the year kept prospectors at bay, there was little to regulate.

But as global warming thaws the ocean's layers, oil giants, shipping companies and even the odd enterprising tourist operator are casting their eyes towards the high north.

The biggest boom could be in oil and gas. The US Geological Survey surprised some experts when it declared that a quarter of the world's undiscovered reserves lay under the Arctic Ocean. As the ice retreats, oil companies are scrambling to open a new frontier.

Attempts to open up the Arctic national wildlife refuge in Alaska to drilling remain deadlocked in the US Congress, but several companies have dipped more than a toe in the chilly Arctic Ocean further north. BP Amoco is developing an Alaskan offshore oil deposit called Northstar and Statoil is working on a gas field 90 miles across the Barents Sea from its most northerly outpost, Hammerfest. Called Snow White, the project is expected to start pumping liquefied natural gas to the US and Europe next year.

Environmental campaigners are viewing the creeping development of the Arctic with mounting concern. Norway announced last month that it will limit drilling in some areas to protect

fragile ecosystems. The 31-mile exclusion zone in the Barents Sea has large supplies of fish. But the embargo expires in 2010 and drilling elsewhere is being stepped up, with the granting of 13 gas and oil licences to 17 companies.

Stephanie Tumore, a climate campaigner with Greenpeace, said: "Haven't we learnt anything? Why are we going looking for more fossil fuels when what's happening in the polar regions just proves that it is devastating and we cannot continue to do that."

The present energy crisis results from a sharp rise in consumption that has outrun a tightening supply,

writes Peter Canby in a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books*. "Most of the oil in the United States is used for fueling the cars and trucks that have been almost entirely responsible for the growth in demand over the last few decades."

Now, 1,000 square miles of Arctic tundra on Alaska's North Slope is home to one of the world's largest industrial complexes, with 28 oil production plants, 4,800 exploration and production wells, 1,800 miles of pipes and 500 miles of roads. The spread of this sort of development around the Arctic raises many new fears.

A flap over bird flu

Mediawatch: Bernard Dixon looks at the differing Scottish and English newspaper responses to the first confirmed case of H5N1 bird flu in the UK.

April 7 was the day that brought public confirmation that a dead swan found in a Scottish fishing village had succumbed to the H5N1 avian influenza virus. The strain had emerged originally among chickens in China and the far East and had spread to and killed some of their handlers. After reaching various parts of mainland Europe, the virus had now arrived in Britain in the wake of growing concern over its capacity to ravage the country's poultry industry. An even greater anxiety was that mutation or recombination might equip the agent for person-to-person transmission and thus spawn a lethal pandemic.

So was media coverage on that critical day marked by sensational headlines and panicky hyperbole? Scientists prone to blame journalists for offences of this sort would do well to reflect on what actually happened. In fact, a snapshot of the day's newspaper columns revealed much level-headed writing. Both 'up-market' and more popular titles sought to provide authoritative facts about the significance of the finding, and for the most part did so

very competently. Some of the most impressive efforts to avoid over-reaction were in the Scottish newspapers, nearest to the scene of the discovery, rather than in those published in London.

Eschewing the sort of headlines brandished by two especially colourful London-based papers, *The Scotsman's* front page read: "Bird flu — Answers to the key questions...Leading experts assess the human threat and give practical advice." This was followed by eight pages on every aspect of the story. In addition to local coverage of the situation in Cellardyke, Fife, where the swan was found, there were detailed accounts of the measures taken in the entire at-risk area and the reasoning behind them. A sober chronology of the detection of the H5N1 virus in various countries since its initial appearance in China in 1997 was coupled with an explanation by virologist John Oxford of the low risk to human health.

There was cool coverage too in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, under the page one banner "UK's united front to fight bird flu scare". Again, the paper presented a comprehensive dossier of well-informed material, ranging from wildlife issues to the pros, cons and feasibility of vaccination for both chickens and humans. The only fevered note was a report of an attack by the Scottish parliament's environment minister