

# WWF Statement to the Nuuk Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council

## May 12, 2011

WWF recognizes the potential of the Arctic Council as a forum for multilateral engagement, and we are proud to have played a role as Observers since the Council was formed in 1996. In particular, we would like to commend the Arctic Council for its landmark achievement in securing a search and rescue agreement for Arctic waters. The binding nature of this agreement holds promise that Council members will remain committed to the effective implementation of its provisions. WWF will continue to support the development and strengthening of the Council as a place where states, Indigenous peoples, and observers can come together to contribute research, ideas, and policy proposals that lead to binding protections for Arctic ecosystems and peoples.

We believe there is no shortage of pressing issues in the Arctic to which we are turning our attention, and which we commend to the attention of Ministers and Indigenous leaders. The first of these is the increasing interest shown by oil companies in offshore drilling in the Arctic. We are just past the first anniversary of the catastrophic oil blowout off the Gulf Coast of the United States. There is no evidence that oil companies and regulators have yet fully absorbed the lessons from that blowout and are ready to transfer those lessons to the much more difficult working conditions found in the Arctic. There is still no proven technology for cleaning up oil spills in ice covered waters. More than 20 years after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, ecological effects are still being felt, and oil is still found on local beaches. Given these facts, **we believe that the Arctic Council is well placed to turn its attention to a shared effective legal regime of preparedness and prevention of oil spills in the Arctic, and should do so as a matter of urgency.** We are aware of the efforts being made by the Council to address spills of oil and other noxious substances through the report “Behavior of Oil and other Hazardous Substances in Arctic Waters” (BoHaSA) and its recommendations. We have reviewed this report, and are ready to comment and offer our help on refining this work, and to offer our expertise on the impacts of hydrocarbon development to the Council.

The increased interest in Arctic oil is partly spurred by increasing access to the Arctic as summer sea ice continues its steady decline. It is hard to overstate the extent of local and global change driven by the loss of sea ice, and corresponding climate change. This change requires not only sectoral responses such as better and more consistent circumpolar regulation of industrial activities, but also changes in the way the whole region is approached. **WWF proposes a stewardship approach for the whole**

**circumpolar region, to be adopted by the Arctic Council as its frame for action.**

This stewardship would incorporate the ideas of ecosystem based management, and marine spatial planning. **An acceptance of the concept of adaptive ecosystem based management as the basis for all activities** is entirely consistent with the mission of the council, from its earliest days as the The Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), to its present incarnation. Simply stated, it means that management rules should be consistent across national boundaries, where ecosystems cross those boundaries. This is especially important as the boundaries of ecosystems are changing – on land, tundra space is shrinking while in the sea rising temperatures are affecting the numbers and distributions of a variety of species. As much of the overlap of ecosystems occurs in the marine environment, and because the marine environment is relatively unplanned compared to the land, marine spatial planning is an essential tool in ecosystem-based management. **We urge the Council to establish an expert group or task force on ecosystem based management to report back no later than the next Deputy Ministerial meeting.**

Climate change remains the most urgent issue in the Arctic. We need to set the world on the path to an equitable and low carbon future, with the long-term goal of 80% emissions reductions by 2050 to ensure the safety, sustainability and prosperity of people, places and species. We urge the Arctic nations to set explicit and binding national emissions reduction targets towards 80% reduction, and to implement ambitious action plans for adaptation and low carbon development.

Those of us interested in the future of the Arctic must also accept that all planning for that future must understand that Arctic systems are undergoing an extremely dynamic phase. While protected areas remain an important part of the response to change, planning cannot be simply predicated on past experience or on present conditions. Changes in the Arctic are predicted to exceed any changes experienced previously. We are facing the necessity of planning a future for Arctic peoples and ecosystems without a reliable roadmap. This means we must do our best to refine predictions of what the Arctic will become, and how social and ecological systems might respond to change. In other words, **we must assess the resilience of the Arctic.** This assessment could give us the basis required to ensure that the tools of ecosystem based management and marine spatial planning are forward-looking and effectively anticipate changes so there is not a large lag between changing conditions and management responses. WWF has begun some of this work, and has shared and will continue to share its results with all partners in the Arctic Council.

We thank the Danish chair for its success in strengthening the Council, and making its work ever more relevant, and look forward to a continuation of this trend under the guidance of the Swedish chair.