Is it a stretch for Ireland to join the Arctic Council?

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Dublin is roughly 6,500 kilometres from the North Pole, but what's happening at the top of the world is apparently of strategic national interest.

Last week, Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney informed the Dáil that Santa Claus will be exempt from all coronavirus restrictions, a clear priority for Ireland's children.

This week, he was briefing Cabinet about why Ireland needs to secure observer status at the Arctic Council.

There are only eight members of the Arctic Council: Canada, Finland, Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Russia, the United States and Denmark.

So where does Ireland fit in? And why does it want to?
Well, ministers accepted Simon Coveney's argument that observer status would enhance Ireland's understanding of climate change in the Arctic and its effects on sea levels, a problem that will increasingly affect us.

Our main economic focus is fish.

That's because species are increasingly moving northwards, as sea temperatures rise, and Ireland needs to monitor the impacts on its fishing industry.

This is already of interest to Ireland as it currently chairs an international commission called OSPAR, which seeks to protect the marine environment in the northeast Atlantic.

One initiative being advanced by Ireland, through OSPAR, is delivering a high seas Marine Protected Area to protect seabirds of approximately 641,000 sq kilometres.
Our application to the Arctic Council will be considered at its May meeting in Iceland. Positive diplomatic soundings suggest it should be successful.

Yet, economic giants China and India, as well as half a dozen EU states, are already among the 13 nations with observer status at the Arctic Council - and it's not due to fish stocks.

As climate change impacts worsen, and the Arctic sea ice disappears, this opens up a new frontier for global shipping lines and, possibly but controversially, energy exploration.

And the sea ice is disappearing.

The US National Snow and Ice Data Center recently found: "On October 24, Arctic sea ice extent had its largest departure from the 1981 to 2010 average of daily sea ice extent in the 42-year continuous satellite record."

On assignment in Greenland last year, for the 'RTÉ On Climate' series, I spoke to the fishermen of Ilulissat who told me the sea ice that annually surrounded their town had disappeared in their lifetime.
Put bluntly, less sea ice means more opportunities for the extractive industries.

Environmentalists will liken such thinking to someone on the Titanic trying to make money after the lifeboats have already been launched.

But it does explain why there is an intensified focus on the Arctic.

However, Ireland's icy ambitions don't stop there. The South Pole is also in our sights.

Green Party junior minister Malcolm Noonan is firm in the view that Ireland should accede to the Antarctic Treaty.

You read that right - the Antarctic, beloved of explorer Tom Crean.

The Antarctic Treaty is a 60-year-old agreement, signed by 54 countries, which mainly seeks to conserve the continent, promote scientific research and prevent militarisation.

Mr Noonan confirmed to me that he has already written to Taoiseach Micheál Martin and Minister Coveney about the matter.
Mr Noonan sees "immense benefits" if Ireland signs up and, with that in mind, intends to raise the matter at the Cabinet sub-committee on the environment in January.

It will probably surprise most people that Ireland has an interest in the Arctic or Antarctica.

However, for campaigners like Mike Walker, it all makes sense.

He is a consultant with the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, and he told me that Ireland's bid to secure observer status at the Arctic Council is "very welcome".

Like Mr Noonan, he argues: "We should also join the Antarctic Treaty."

Mr Walker explains that both the Arctic and Antarctica are "crucial to our health and the everyday functioning of the planet.

"But both are under extraordinary pressure due to climate change and biodiversity loss. Perversely this is resulting in even greater pressure as states seek to exploit commercial fish stock migrating pole-ward to cooler water, minerals exposed by retreating ice, or new trade routes.

"This in turn is aggravating dangerous geopolitical tensions at both poles."
Mr Walker feels that Ireland has a role to play: "As an island nation, a neutral arbitrator, and as a future champion of ambitious climate action, Ireland is perfectly positioned to advocate for the conservation and protection of both these critically important areas to the health of the planet."

Ireland: Pole-to-Pole. What would Tom Crean have thought?