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NOAA Scientists Say Arctic Ice Is Melting Faster Than Expected

By [Doug Struck](#)
 Washington Post Staff Writer
 Friday, September 7, 2007; Page A06

The Arctic ice cap is melting faster than scientists had expected and will shrink 40 percent by 2050 in most regions, with grim consequences for polar bears, walrus and other marine animals, according to government researchers.

The Arctic sea ice will retreat hundreds of miles farther from the coast of [Alaska](#) in the summer, the scientists at the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) concluded. That will open up vast waters for fishermen and give easier access to new areas for oil and gas exploration. It is also likely to mean an upheaval in species, bringing new predators to warmer waters and endangering those that depend on ice.

The study, by NOAA oceanographer James Overland and meteorologist Muyin Wang, adds to the increasingly urgent predictions of major ice loss in the Arctic. Six years ago, the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) predicted major ice loss by 2100. An update by that [United Nations](#)-sponsored panel in February said that without drastic changes in greenhouse gas emissions, Arctic sea ice will "almost entirely" disappear by the end of the century.

But Overland's calculations are based largely on the carbon dioxide that already has been pumped into the atmosphere. That pollution will greatly diminish the ice by 2050, regardless of future curbs on emissions, he said yesterday.

"The amount of emissions we have already put out in the last 20 years will stay around for 40 to 50 years," Overland said. "I'm afraid to say that a lot of impacts we will see in the next 30 to 40 years are pretty much already established."

Overland and Wang compared 20 climate change computer models

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with satellite observations of Arctic ice cover. They discarded models that did not accurately track the ice cover for 20 years in the past and extended the accurate models to predict the ice melt by 2050. The research will be published tomorrow in the journal *Geophysical Research Letters*.

"The rate of ice loss now is faster than what was depicted," Overland said. "This moves the threshold up."

The two researchers also narrowed their focus to specific parts of the Arctic. Because of wind and water currents, the sea ice off [Canada](#)'s northeast coast in Baffin Bay will change little, Overland said, but in most other regions, including Alaska's Bering Sea, it will shrink dramatically.

"This will have a profound effect on the animals that use sea ice all the time, including walrus and polar bears and ringed seals," he said. "You will actually have a change in the whole ecosystem. You will have winners and losers. Crabs, clams, walrus and bears will not do well. Salmon, pollock and other fisheries that live higher up in the water column will extend their range."

"We really don't have a clue how that will look," Overland said of the species changes. Pollock already moving into the Bering Sea were expected to thrive, for example, but there has been an unexpected loss in species on which the fish feed and an unexpected increase in predator species, he said.

Ice in Alaska's Bering Sea has shrunk significantly this decade, in large part because of an unusual wind blowing warm air toward the Arctic, Overland said. But that natural effect is aggravated by global warming, which is heating Arctic areas more quickly than more southerly regions.

"There is a whole lot of uncertainty about what will happen next," he said. "Are we approaching a tipping point where we have lost so much ice already that, when the winds change, we have already gone too far?"

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