

The Importance of the Arctic

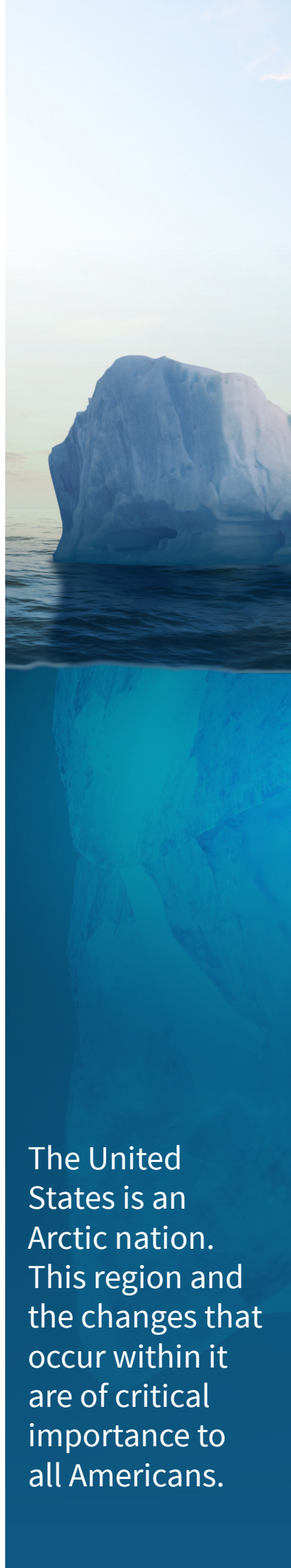
The United States is an Arctic nation with critical interests in the region related to the prosperity of indigenous communities, environmental protection, responsible economic development, and safety and security. Consisting of deep ocean covered by drifting ice and surrounded by land around the Earth's North Pole, the Arctic is the planet's largest and least fragmented inhabited region. But the Arctic has reached a critical point in its history: it is facing unprecedented rates of change and challenges driven by a warming climate.

The melting of Arctic sea ice will transform global shipping and transportation routes, energy production and markets, commercial fishing activities, and will significantly impact ecosystems and communities. All of this presents the United States, and other Arctic nations, with a pressing need to use collaborative and innovative approaches to effectively manage this rapidly changing region. The U.S. chairmanship of the Arctic Council provides us with a unique window of opportunity to demonstrate the global leadership needed to address these pressing issues. Strong leadership will also be needed domestically to better inform all Americans about how what happens in the Arctic impacts their lives and communities.

Arctic Ocean Leadership Roundtable

As part of JOCI's effort to develop an Ocean Action Agenda to deliver to current leaders and those taking office after the 2016 elections, JOCI brought together key Arctic stakeholders for the Arctic Ocean Leadership Roundtable, a series of discussions designed to gather valuable input on how our nation should be addressing priorities for the Arctic. JOCI held discussions in Washington, DC; Fairbanks, Alaska; and Barrow, Alaska to meaningfully engage perspectives at the federal, state, and local levels.

The meeting in Washington, DC included representatives from ocean-related industries, science and research, national security, conservation, native communities, and federal and state government discussing how to support the United States as it assumed chairmanship of the Arctic Council, issues related to environment and climate change, commercial activities and the related infrastructure needs, and safety and security. The meetings in Fairbanks and Barrow enhanced the Joint Initiative's understanding of various Alaskan perspectives on Arctic policy issues including critical challenges facing the region, opportunities for progress, and appropriate activities and potential policy reforms. This document summarizes the key priorities, themes, and ideas that emerged from the Arctic Ocean Leadership Roundtable.

A photograph of a large iceberg floating in the ocean. The top part of the iceberg is visible above the water surface, while the much larger, submerged part is visible below. The water is a deep blue, and the sky is a pale, hazy blue. The iceberg has a jagged, rocky appearance.

The United States is an Arctic nation. This region and the changes that occur within it are of critical importance to all Americans.

Priorities Identified by Arctic Leaders

Increase resources for and attention to climate change adaptation: In the Arctic, the impacts of global climate change are experienced firsthand every day at the local level through rising sea levels, shrinking sea ice, thawing permafrost, damaging storm surges, and coastal communities in peril from flooding and erosion. Arctic leaders are calling for immediate action to improve the rapidly changing conditions of Arctic communities and ecosystems through efforts such as pursuing responsible development in the region, enhancing adaptation strategies for subsistence communities, promoting cross-sectoral coordination and planning for things such as access to new fisheries and shipping routes, and relocation planning for vulnerable communities.

Invest in Arctic infrastructure: With new opportunities for commercial activities and economic development emerging throughout the region, significant infrastructure improvements are needed to manage and plan for increased and varied activities. To meet the evolving needs of the region, the Arctic requires vast improvements to its infrastructure in areas such as Arctic ports, search and rescue capabilities, weather forecasting, coastal erosion and storm protection, as well as capital improvement projects, telecommunication, and risk management.

Invest in Arctic research: With the Arctic changing more rapidly than any other place on earth, robust research systems are needed to assess these changes and inform future policy decisions. Our nation's leaders should support the coordination of industry sharing of environmental data; the establishment of a clearinghouse of baseline scientific data and local knowledge; fisheries surveys and exploration of the potential of establishing community development quotas; and the creation of a national center for oil spill research in the Arctic.

Enhance international cooperation: Under the U.S. chairmanship of the Arctic Council, there is an opportunity to strengthen the diplomatic efforts and relationships that exist across the Arctic region that span national borders to improve economic and living conditions for Arctic communities, improve Arctic ocean safety and security, and address the impacts of climate change. Arctic leaders also are calling for the United States to establish partnerships with other Arctic nations to build capacity for research, oil spill response, search and rescue, and risk analysis and mitigation efforts.

Secure long-term funding for existing Arctic initiatives and improve the regulatory and decision making processes: Future policy efforts should build upon and fully implement existing initiatives, such as the National Strategy for the Arctic and the Alaska Arctic Policy Commission, and actively include native Alaskans in decision making processes. A permanent funding mechanism should be established for ocean monitoring, observations, charting, and hydrography to meet long-term data needs.



In the Arctic, the global impacts of climate change are experienced firsthand every day at the local level.