

Why cumulative impacts assessments of hydrocarbon activities in the Arctic fail to meet their purpose

The Arctic Region is characterised by vulnerable ecosystems and residing indigenous people, dependent on nature for subsistence fishing and hunting. The Arctic also contains a wealth of non-living natural resources such as minerals and hydrocarbons. Synergies between increased access and growing global demand for the Arctic resources influence the level and nature of human activity and its influence on the environment. It is therefore essential to assess and mitigate the cumulative impacts from these activities. Environmental Assessment (EA) is a common tool applied by the Arctic nations to secure that environmental considerations are included in decision-making when new plans and projects are implemented. However, recent research has indicated that assessment of cumulative impacts in EAs is inconsistent and the practises ambiguous. This article explores this phenomenon further by reviewing and analysing current practices of assessing cumulative impacts in EAs in relation to offshore oil and gas activities in the Arctic. It is found that cumulative impacts assessments are generally lacking. The practitioners involved explain this with reference to the challenge of addressing and assessing cumulative impacts due to their complex nature. They further point at lacking methodological guidelines as well as lack of resources during the impact assessment process.

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