

Polar Code protects ships and species in icy waters

Rules aim to curb risks from increased traffic in Arctic and Antarctica.

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More and more vessels are plying the waters of Antarctica, leading to concerns for marine environments and human safety.

Ships operating in the icy waters around the north and south poles will be subject to special regulations for the first time, after a Polar Code was adopted last week.

The rules come in the wake of high-profile accidents that have seen ships abandoned or sunk after coming to grief in Arctic and Antarctic seas, raising fears for these delicate environments as well as human life.

Developed under the auspices of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the United Nations shipping agency, the code will regulate the types of ship that are allowed to operate in Arctic and Antarctic waters, and how they are run. Officially called the International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters, and coming into force over the next few years, it will include technical specifications such as the amount of structural reinforcement required by ships operating in thick ice, and what survival equipment they must carry for passengers and crew.

A code is widely considered necessary as Antarctic tourism increases and thinning Arctic sea ice raises the possibility that the Northwest Passage between Europe and Asia will become regularly navigable. Sanctions for those who break the code have yet to be detailed, but polar experts say that the regulations are likely to have teeth.

“The Polar Code is a seminal and historic new regime for Arctic and Antarctic waters,” says Lawson Brigham, who specializes in polar policy at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. “Focusing on marine safety and environmental protection, the Polar Code is an important advance for protecting Arctic people and polar marine environments.”

The issue came to public attention in 2007, when the cruise ship *Explorer* sank while taking tourists around Antarctica. The incident sparked concerns about pollution from marine fuel and other debris. Fishing vessels have also experienced difficulties in regions where help is often a long way away.

Frosty reception

But some observers feel that the rules should have been stronger, and criticize the code for not going far enough to prevent environmental incidents. For example, although it includes recommendations on avoiding marine mammals such as seals and whales, the code does not make any mention of seabirds. Environmental groups have also expressed concerns that the toughest regulations will initially apply only to new ships, and not to those that already operate in polar waters, sometimes without special structural strengthening to help them to cope with ice.

An IMO meeting in May will consider adding further regulations related to pollution.

“It is good we got a code. It is a step forward, there’s no doubt about that,” says Sian Prior, an adviser with the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, a non-governmental organization based in Washington DC. “We desperately need this code in place but we had hoped to get further protection.”

The IMO says that it is “generally accepted” that there may be increased traffic in polar waters in the coming years. According to data from Russia, only a few dozen ships used polar waters to travel between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region in 2013, but under some estimates there could be nearly 500 such voyages per year by 2030. And Antarctic waters are increasingly busy with research, fishing and cruise ships.

“Even with low levels of traffic, it is still important to ensure any ships trading in the polar regions are adequately protected and equipped for the specific environments,” said the IMO in a statement. “Even one serious accident would be one too many.”

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