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Arctic nations strike down research roadblocks

Binding pact aims to ease access to field sites and shipment of samples across national borders.

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12 May 2017

FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

Jeremy Potter/NOAA

Scientists in the Arctic will have improved access to facilities such as icebreaking ships.

Researchers working in the Arctic will face less red tape, under an agreement signed by representatives of the eight Arctic nations at a meeting in Fairbanks, Alaska, on 11 May.

The legally binding document should help to ease rules that can hinder data collection and obstruct the transport of analytical equipment, data and samples across national borders. The pact is also designed to give scientists better access to government science facilities — including ice-breaking ships — and to terrestrial, coastal, atmospheric and marine areas for field research.

“It will break through the bureaucratic logjams that one finds when trying to work in the Arctic,” says Evan Bloom, director of the US State Department’s office of ocean and polar affairs. He is also the co-chair of the Arctic Council task force that drew up the agreement, which was signed by Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia and the United States.

Scientists working in the far north often need to clear several layers of approval, dealing with review by national, regional and local authorities.

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“There are visas, permits for equipment, permits for taking your ship into other nations’ waters, and so on,” says Jan-Gunnar Winther, director of the Norwegian Polar Institute in Tromsø. “If there are many permissions that need to be handled by different authorities, it takes that much longer — sometimes too long.”

Doing research in Russia can be particularly challenging, some scientists told *Nature*. They described struggles to import equipment to the country, including satellite phones and instruments that tap into the Global Positioning System, and times when they had to leave samples and data behind.

“It’s heartbreaking to have permits and bureaucracy block progress,” says Cheryl Rosa, deputy director of the US Arctic Research Commission, a biologist and veterinary surgeon who studies marine-mammal health. Rosa worked with hunters in Chukotka, Russia, in 2011, to study toxins in grey whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*), but has been unable to take her samples back to the United States for analysis. “I still have many samples sitting in a freezer there,” she says.

The agreement could ease such impasses, but only if participating countries follow through on their commitments, says Winther. “If this is going to be helpful for scientists,” he says, “it does of course have to be implemented.”

Nature doi:10.1038/nature.2017.21988