

Policy framework

The Netherlands and the Polar Regions, 2011-2015

Summary and priorities

The policy outlined in this Policy Framework for the Polar Regions (2011-2015) is part of the government's orientation towards achieving global objectives, such as strengthening the international legal order, defending Dutch economic interests (e.g. fostering a knowledge economy and securing a meaningful role for the business community) and protecting global public goods (such as the climate, biodiversity and energy).

Dutch polar policy has taken shape gradually since the late 1980s. In 1990 the Netherlands was granted consultative status to the Antarctic Treaty and co-responsibility for the administration of Antarctica. This responsibility impelled us to formulate a coherent vision for the continent and the surrounding maritime area. That responsibility also entailed a treaty obligation to conduct, and therefore finance, substantive scientific research in Antarctica.

Initially, Dutch polar policy was oriented toward Antarctica. During the 1990s, following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the North Pole region began to emerge as an arena for international cooperation. These last few years, in particular, have witnessed a strong surge of both political and economic interest in the North Pole region. The current policy framework is the first to devote more attention to the North Pole region than to the South. Whereas previous policy frameworks were largely confined to environmental issues and scientific research, the present document attempts to situate the polar regions in a much broader context: political, strategic, economic (raw materials, energy, fishing, shipping), security, indigenous peoples, the international legal order, etc.

Four ministries are involved in crafting the Netherlands' polar policy: the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Economic Affairs, Agriculture & Innovation, Infrastructure & the Environment, and Education, Culture & Science. These ministries and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) jointly finance the Netherlands Polar Programme (NPP). The NPP is in charge of organising and implementing Dutch polar research and representing the Netherlands in polar forums devoted to more technical matters. The research activities themselves are coordinated by the NWO.

Justification for a Dutch polar policy

1. Our obligation to promote the international legal order, a key objective of government policy for decades, is enshrined in the Dutch constitution. In the polar regions, the Netherlands shoulders this responsibility through its membership of the Antarctic Treaty, the Spitsbergen Treaty and the Convention for Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR).
2. Environmental protection is a top priority of Dutch polar policy. Its objectives are to protect nature and the environment, aid in the sustainable stewardship and development of the Arctic region, and undertake scientific research in support of environmental policy. The Netherlands has played a pioneering global role in highlighting the issue of environmental protection for over 20 years.
3. Climate change has laid bare the role of the polar regions as regulators of the global climate. A detailed understanding of the mass balance of the polar icecaps – and thus rising sea levels – is in the Netherlands' national interest.
4. As one of the world's 20 largest economies, the Netherlands should play a role in managing global public goods.
5. There are emerging economic interests for the Netherlands and the European Union in the North Pole region. At some point in the future, oil and gas extraction, shipping and fishing will become commercially viable for Dutch businesses. This will necessitate detailed and deliberate decision-making about the advisability of such activities and careful planning to ensure their sustainability.

Policy principles and objectives for the Arctic region: main points

1. The Netherlands would like to contribute to the multilateral Arctic administrative structure, taking its lead in the maritime areas from the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (1982). At this point we are not pursuing a comprehensive treaty, along the lines of the Antarctic Treaty, for the entire Arctic region.
2. The Netherlands will, instead, concentrate on (1) the diligent implementation of existing treaties and the development of strict, binding supplementary international norms and agreements – based on the precautionary principle – for enhanced protection of the Arctic environment and (2) sustainable management of and

supplementary international agreements on fishing, shipping and extractive industries. Compliance with these norms will be another focal point.

3. The Netherlands regards the Arctic Council as the best circumpolar policy form for achieving overarching Arctic stewardship objectives. We will remain active as an observer to the Arctic Council, participating among other things in the Council's working groups.
4. The Netherlands supports a larger role for the European Union in the North Pole region on the grounds that a European role will lead to synergy and economies of scale. We support eventual observer status for the EU.
5. The Netherlands believes that the far north is of enduring strategic significance.
6. The Netherlands foresees an increase in the extraction of fossil fuels in the far north. With that in mind, we will work to ensure that the exploitation of oil and gas takes place under very strict environmental and security standards. We feel that the advisability of such activities should be assessed in the light of the special vulnerability of the Arctic environment and the position of indigenous peoples.
7. As part of the appropriate stimulus and innovation programmes, the Netherlands will support, in response to demand, research and development on safeguarding the sustainability of Arctic shipping and offshore technology, as well as Arctic civil engineering and hydraulic engineering technology, building on existing expertise within the Dutch business community and knowledge institutes.
8. The Netherlands will contribute proportionally to creating a network of protected marine areas in the North Pole region and to developing joint stewardship of the marine environment aimed at ecosystem conservation. In that connection we will support IMO initiatives to tighten environmental standards for Arctic shipping.
9. The Netherlands is committed to protecting and preserving Arctic biodiversity. This commitment entails, among other things, the transnational protection of major Arctic nature areas and of birds in the Netherlands whose migratory routes include the Arctic.
10. The Netherlands is opposed to the start of fishing activities in the North Pole region in areas for which no conservation and management regimes exist.

Policy principles and objectives for Antarctica: main points

1. As a result of the Cabinet decision in 1989 to pursue consultative status within the Antarctic Treaty and the attainment of this status in 1990, the Netherlands has undertaken to conduct substantial scientific research in Antarctica and to co-administer the Antarctic region for an indefinite period. The Netherlands will continue to fulfil these treaty obligations in the future.
2. The Netherlands regards the Antarctic Treaty System as a competent and legitimate framework for decision-making on Antarctica and sees no role in this area for the UN General Assembly, apart from the enforcement of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and relevant International Maritime Organisation (IMO) treaties.
3. The Netherlands recognises no territorial claims in the Antarctic region.
4. The Netherlands' Antarctic policy puts the interests of Antarctica first and strives to protect the continent as unspoilt wilderness.
5. It is the Netherlands' view that no activity on Antarctica should entail more than minor or temporary environmental effects or other effects. For this reason we are not interested in pursuing our own permanent research station. The Netherlands will work to limit the number of scientific stations, on the principle that scientific research should be conducted as much as possible at shared facilities.
6. The Netherlands will not support proposals that would permit either activities involving mineral extraction or a permanent tourist infrastructure.
7. The Netherlands supports initiatives aimed at increasing the security of shipping in Antarctica and reducing its environmental impact. This requires coordination with the IMO. At the same time the Netherlands supports the competency of the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) to take more extensive measures in this regard in the geographical area covered by the treaty, in so far as the other relevant forums have no plans.
8. Tourists account for 99% of visitors to Antarctica. The Netherlands supports sustainable Antarctic tourism. We back the formulation of a long-term policy vision and strategy for the promotion of tourism to Antarctica. In principle the Netherlands is in favour of self-regulation on the part of the International Association of Antarctica

Tour Operators (IAATO), the body that represents the sector.

9. With respect to the Antarctic marine environment the Netherlands supports the CCAMLR's ecosystem and precautionary approaches. We will look into the feasibility of joining the CCAMLR Commission.
10. Within the scope of the Protection of Antarctica Act (WbA) the Netherlands will in principle issue no permits for activities that could harm the intrinsic value of the continent.
11. Dutch policy on whaling is expressed by our representatives at the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and is not considered part of the Netherlands' polar policy.