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As an Arctic nation, U.S. must embrace smart, science-based stewardship

More needs to be understood of the Arctic's environment, these guest columnists write. The Arctic has a significant influence on the global system so any impacts from increased activity must be given special consideration. This creates a tension between exploitation and conservation that can only be resolved through effective governance.

By Nancy Sutley, Jane Lubchenco and Thad Allen

THE United States is an Arctic nation — a privileged status that is underappreciated by much of the American public. As such, we have a sovereign duty to adopt comprehensive, science-based policies, supported with sufficient resources that allow us to achieve the right balance between the numerous interests in this region.

This situation has more relevance to the Puget Sound area than perhaps anywhere else in the continental U.S. due to close economic ties and the fact it is home to the entire U.S. Polar Icebreaker fleet, consisting of the nation's only three surface vessels capable of sustained Polar operations.

Two weeks ago, we had the privilege of traveling throughout Alaska to meet with local communities and see firsthand the challenges and opportunities emerging in an increasingly accessible Arctic region. The common observation that we came away with is that the U.S. Arctic region — including its native peoples, its environment and its resources — is a true national treasure, but a vulnerable one.

Climate change is causing Arctic temperatures to rise at nearly twice the global rate, resulting in back-to-back record low sea-ice coverage in 2007 and 2008. Decreasing sea ice and new technologies, including ships adapted for ice operations and improved energy-exploration techniques, are opening new possibilities for shipping routes and marine activity in an opening Arctic. Throw in the lure of diverse and valuable natural resources — including energy, minerals and fisheries — and it is clear why this situation has been referred to as "Alaska's next gold rush."

More needs to be understood of the Arctic's environment, but we already know that it has a significant influence on the global system so any impacts from increased activity must be given special consideration. This creates a tension between exploitation and conservation that can only be resolved through effective governance.

We were reminded repeatedly during our trip, "The ocean is Alaska's garden." The Arctic environment and its global influence must be better understood before actions are taken that may harm it irrevocably. Development must be pursued patiently and in concert with a broader, more aggressive research agenda. The economic potential of

the Arctic should be looked at as long-term opportunity across a range of enterprises, with emphasis on sustainability, rather than as a short-term boom. As regional activities increase, so must our ability to manage them to prevent or respond to any environmental, safety or security risks.

Understanding this, policy decisions on the Arctic region can neither be considered in isolation nor can they wait until the "rush" is on. They require a proactive whole-of-government approach that is both horizontal — requiring collaboration across the federal government — and vertical — ensuring that the local communities and the state of Alaska who will be most directly impacted by these decisions have sufficient influence. Additionally, we must seek regional consensus and collaboration with the other Arctic states and international organizations in this region.

In Anchorage, we held the first of five public meetings of the President's Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force and received constructive input from people throughout the state on a diverse range of issues. The task force is charged with developing a recommendation for a national policies that ensure protection, maintenance and restoration of our oceans, coasts and the Great Lakes. It will also recommend a framework for improved stewardship and effective marine spatial planning. We are committed to ensuring the Arctic region is given the unique status it deserves and will continue to give it special consideration by the task force.

We will continue to give priority to scientific study of this region to improve our understanding, provide for sustainable management and ensure our future actions do no harm. This will require greater investment in regional observations and supporting infrastructure; more scientific exploration, research, modeling and predictions; and improved technology and data management.

We strongly support ratification of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea. The oceans have been called, "the last global commons," and their sustained global health can best be maintained by a stable, universally accepted convention that promotes the key interests of the United States, its allies and its trading partners. Ratification would ensure our ability to participate in interpreting and applying the convention to the changing realities of the global maritime environment and preserves our ability to protect our domestic interests, including our extended continental shelf claims.

We will continue to evaluate the operating requirements and resources necessary to ensure the safety, security and stewardship of the region associated with increased domestic and international maritime activity. Among other things, this requires icebreakers to meet mission requirements in both the Arctic and Antarctic. To retain this critical national capability we need to preserve our current capacity and plan for the future.

The U.S. is in the unique and privileged position of being an Arctic nation. This privilege brings with it national obligations. We must ensure that strategy, policies and adequate federal resources are in place today in order to effectively manage and prepare for

these challenges tomorrow. The consequences of losing a treasure like the Arctic are simply unacceptable.

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