



Arctic Sea Ice

This indicator tracks the extent and age of sea ice in the Arctic Ocean.

Background

Sea ice is an integral part of the Arctic Ocean. During the dark winter months, sea ice essentially covers the entire Arctic Ocean. In summer, some of this ice melts because of warmer temperatures and long hours of sunlight. Sea ice typically reaches its minimum thickness and extent in mid-September, when the area covered by ice is roughly half the size of the winter maximum. The ice then begins expanding again.

The extent of area covered by Arctic sea ice is an important indicator of changes in global climate because warmer air and water temperatures are reducing the amount of sea ice present. Because sea ice is more reflective than liquid water, it plays a significant role in the Earth's energy balance and keeping polar regions cool. (For more information on the effects of surface color on reflecting sunlight, see the Snow Cover indicator on p. 56.) Sea ice also keeps the air cool by forming a barrier between the air above and the warmer water below. As the amount of sea ice decreases, the Arctic region's ability to stabilize the Earth's climate is reduced, potentially leading to a "feedback loop" of more absorption of solar energy, higher air temperatures, and even greater loss of sea ice.

The age of sea ice is also an important indicator of Arctic conditions because older ice is generally thicker and stronger than younger ice. A loss of older ice suggests that the Arctic is losing ice faster than it is accumulating it.

Changes in sea ice can directly affect the health of Arctic ecosystems. Mammals such as polar bears and walrus rely on the presence of sea ice to preserve their hunting, breeding, and migrating habits. These animals face the threat of declining birth rates and restricted access to food sources because of reduced sea ice coverage and thickness. Impacts on Arctic wildlife, as well as the loss of ice itself, are already restricting the traditional subsistence hunting lifestyle of indigenous Arctic populations such as the Yup'ik, Iñupiat, and Inuit.

While diminished sea ice can have negative ecological effects, it can also present commercial opportunities. For instance, reduced sea ice opens shipping lanes and increases access to natural resources in the Arctic region.

Dwindling Arctic Sea Ice



Source: NASA, 2012²

Key Points

- September 2012 had the lowest sea ice extent on record, 49 percent below the 1979–2000 average for that month.
- The September 2012 record low sea ice extent was 1.3 million square miles (an area five times the size of Texas) less than the historical 1979–2000 average (see Figure 1).
- Although the annual minimum of sea ice extent typically occurs in September, all months have shown a decreasing trend in sea ice extent over the past several decades. The largest decreases have occurred in the summer and fall.^{3,4}
- Evidence of the age of Arctic sea ice suggests an overall loss of multi-year ice. The proportion of sea ice five years or older has declined dramatically over the recorded time period, from more than 30 percent of September ice in the 1980s to 4 percent in 2012. A growing percentage of Arctic sea ice is only one or two years old. This thinning of Arctic ice makes it more vulnerable to further melting.

About the Indicator

Figure 1 presents trends in Arctic sea ice extent from 1979, when extensive measurements started, to 2012. Sea ice extent is defined as the area of ocean where at least 15 percent of the surface is frozen. This threshold was chosen because scientists have found that it gives the best approximation of the edge of the ice. Data are collected throughout the year, but for comparison, this indicator focuses on the average sea ice extent in September of each year. This is because September is typically when the sea ice extent reaches its annual minimum after melting during the spring and summer. Data for this indicator were gathered by the National Snow and Ice Data Center using satellite imaging technology.

Figure 2 examines the age of the ice that is present in the Arctic during the week in September with the smallest extent of ice. By combining daily satellite images, wind measurements, and data from surface buoys that move with the ice, scientists can track specific parcels of ice as they move over time. This tracking enables them to calculate the age of the ice in different parts of the Arctic. Although satellites started collecting data in 1979, Figure 2 only shows trends back to 1983 because it is not possible to know the full age distribution until the ice has been tracked for at least five years.

Figure 1. September Monthly Average Arctic Sea Ice Extent, 1979–2012

This figure shows Arctic sea ice extent from 1979 through 2012 using data from September of each year, which is when the minimum extent typically occurs.

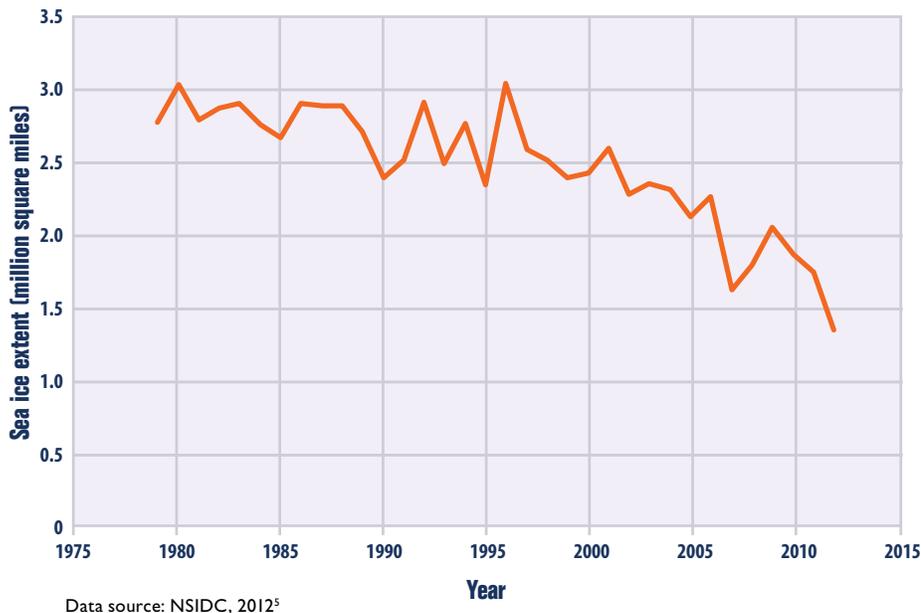
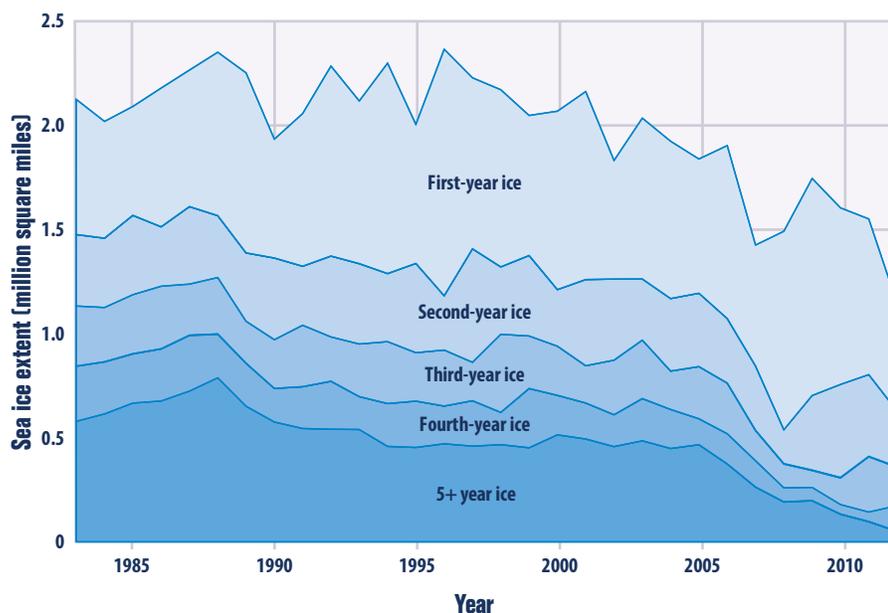


Figure 2. Age of Arctic Sea Ice at Minimum September Week, 1983–2012*

This figure shows the distribution of Arctic sea ice extent by age group during the peak melting week in September of each year.



* The total extent in Figure 2 differs from Figure 1 because Figure 1 shows a monthly average, while Figure 2 shows conditions during a single week.

Data source: NSIDC, 2012⁶

Indicator Notes

Increasing temperatures associated with climate change are not the only factor contributing to reductions in sea ice. Other conditions that may be affected by climate change, such as fluctuations in oceanic and atmospheric circulation and typical annual and decadal variability, also affect the extent of sea ice. Determining the age of ice is an imperfect science, as there are cases where a small amount of older ice might exist within an area classified as younger, or vice-versa.

Data Sources

The data for this indicator were provided by the National Snow and Ice Data Center. Data for Figure 1 are also available online at: http://nsidc.org/data/seaice_index/archives/index.html, while Figure 2 is based on an analysis by the University of Colorado and a graph published at: <http://nsidc.org/arctic-seaicenews/2012/10/poles-apart-a-record-breaking-summer-and-winter>. The National Snow and Ice Data Center produces a variety of reports and a seasonal newsletter analyzing Arctic sea ice data.