

Safeguarding a Precious Arctic Seascape: How Inuit Created the Foremost Marine Conservation Area in Canada

The Tallurutiup Imanga National Marine Conservation Area (Lancaster Sound) is a must-see when you visit the High Arctic. Learn more about this special place—an ecologically and culturally rich waterway, and also one of the largest conservation areas in Canada!

By **Aaron Spitzer** | January 27, 2021

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Powell Inlet, Tallurutiup Imanga

If you're from Canada, you've likely heard of [land-claim settlements](#), providing Indigenous peoples with the power to protect their traditional lands. But for Inuit, it's not just lands they seek to protect—it's water, too. Historically, Inuit spent much of the year living out on the sea ice and today they still travel, camp, and hunt there. The ocean sustains Inuit—filling bellies with seals, whales, walrus, and fish, as well as nourishing souls.

So, it's no wonder that Inuit of Nunavut are working to safeguard their Arctic waters. They've spearheaded a vast protected zone, the Tallurutiup Imanga National Marine Conservation Area. The area is one of Canada's natural and cultural wonders. It's also one of Adventure Canada's favourite spots, featuring prominently on our Arctic trips.



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A walrus mother and pup rest on an ice floe in Tallurutiup Imanga.

The name Tallurutiup Imanga refers to the waters around Talluruti (Devon Island), especially Lancaster Sound, gateway to the Northwest Passage. From there, the conservation area sprawls out, reaching east into Baffin Bay, west along the Parry Channel, and covering Admiralty and Navy Board Inlets to the south. In all, it encompasses 109,000 square kilometres, bigger than Lakes Huron, Erie, and Ontario combined. It's the largest conservation area in Canada.

Not so long ago, its safety was in question. Concerns began in the 1960s when Arctic oil and gas exploration commenced. In 2009, seismic testing was scheduled in Lancaster Sound to assess its oil and gas resources. Inuit protested and in August 2010 obtained a court injunction to stop the tests. That same year, the regional Qikiqtani Inuit Association, along with the governments of Nunavut and Canada, began the process of founding the conservation area. In 2019, the conservation plan went into action.

It wasn't a moment too soon. In our warming world, Tallurutiup Imanga is a place of extreme ecological significance. It's a refuge for the Arctic's most awe-inspiring and endangered creatures, including Canada's largest subpopulation of polar bears, seventy-five per cent of the world's [narwhals](#), plus [bowhead whales](#), [belugas](#), walrus, and seals. It's also the summer habitat of millions of breeding seabirds, including thick-billed murres, northern fulmars, and black-legged kittiwakes. Surrounding the waters of the conservation area are stunning glaciers, snow-capped peaks, delicate tundra plains, and desert-like badlands.



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The very rare ivory gull relies on Tallurutiup Imanga as part of its breeding ground.

As important as Tallurutiup Imanga is for the Arctic environment, it is just as valuable culturally. Inuit have thrived here since time immemorial. These are the waterways through which they [historically travelled](#) to populate the Eastern Arctic, Greenland, and Labrador. Found here are Inuit archaeological, historic, and sacred sites. Today, the area is flanked by several Inuit communities: Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet), Qausuittuq (Resolute), Ikpiarjuk (Arctic Bay), and Ausuittuq (Grise Fiord). Inuit will manage the conservation area in collaboration with Parks Canada, allowing traditional lifeways to continue.

Meanwhile, Adventure Canada will continue journeying in Tallurutiup Imanga, supporting Inuit in their efforts—and benefitting from the protection of this precious Arctic seascape.

About the Author



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For more than twenty years, Aaron has obsessively explored, studied, documented—and yammered about—the world's polar places.

For a decade he ran Up Here, the journal of Canada's north, which in 2010 was named the country's best magazine. Before that, Aaron edited Canada's northernmost paper (Nunatsiag News), the world's southernmost paper (Antarctic Sun), and the highest-circulation paper in the Alaskan "Bush" (Tundra Drums).

Aaron recently left Arctic journalism for Arctic academia. He earned a master's degree in Northern Studies at the University of Alaska in 2015, and is now working on his Ph.D. at the University of Bergen, Norway, where he examines the opportunities and challenges of Indigenous governance in the circumpolar world.