

'It's too warm': Greenland's traditional fishers pushed towards polluting practices as ice melts

Emma Burrows, Kwiyeon Ha and Evgeniy Maloletka

Fisherman Helgi Aargil no longer knows what to expect on Greenland's fjords, where he spends up to five days at a time on his boat with his dog, Molly, and the ever-changing Northern Lights in the sky as company. Last year, his boat got stuck in ice that broke off the nearby glacier. This year, it's been very wet instead. His income is just as unpredictable. An outing could bring him around 100,000 Danish kroner (about €13,400), or nothing at all.

The Arctic's rapidly changing climate is bringing more questions for Greenland, the semi-autonomous territory of Denmark that's been shaken by US President Donald Trump's interest in owning it.

While Trump's approach to Greenland has shifted, the world has been unable to slow the effects of climate change. The Arctic is warming faster than any other region in the world, driven by the burning of oil, gas and coal. What that means for the fishing industry that largely drives Greenland's economy is unknown. Fishing accounts for up to 95 per cent of exports, many to the territory's biggest market, China, along with the United States, Japan and Europe.

Disappearing Arctic sea ice

Wrapped in a wool sweater against the freezing wind, Aargil explains



A fisherman catches halibut at Disko Bay near Ilulissat, Greenland, on Wednesday, Jan. 28, 2026.

how he fishes for halibut and cod. Other top catches are shrimp and snow crab, which including legs can reach more than a metre in length.

Traditional ice fishermen who make up half the local industry are seeing the most dramatic changes to the way they fish. "My father was fishing from the sea ice" one and a half metres thick, recalls Karl Sandgreen, head of the Icefjord Center that documents climate change in the region and is based in the town of Ilulissat.

That sea ice started disappearing around 1997, Sandgreen says, and fishermen who drilled through the ice to fish increasingly started to fish by boat instead. The use of boats allows fishermen to reach

larger areas, but that can come with extra costs and pollution that accelerates warming.

Related ['Not that optimistic': As 30x30 goals falter, can an Ocean Act save Europe's waters? Meet the Inuit scientist kayaking around Greenland to highlight just how far microplastics travel](#)

Traditional fishers could be pushed to go commercial

Fishing has shaped Greenland's communities. The harbour where fishermen return to sell their catch is at the heart of every town or village. Before heading out, some fishermen pick up boxes from the island's fishing companies to pack their catch which, in the capital of

Nuuk, is winched from the boat to the fish factory.

Take Binzer, the chief executive of the island's single biggest employer, Royal Greenland, says he is increasingly worried about a future with greatly diminished sea ice. That could push traditional fishermen toward larger communities and into the ranks of commercial fishing. The challenge now is how to support traditional fishermen when there is sometimes "too much ice to sail, too little to go out on", Binzer says. Already, that unpredictability has caused a "huge" problem. Royal Greenland already loans fishermen money to buy a boat, which they repay from selling their

catch, Binzer says. If everyone turns to fishing from boats, that could help economically but lead to overfishing, says Boris Worm, an expert in marine biodiversity at Dalhousie University in Canada. In Greenland, there are already signs of too much fishing close to shore as halibut are getting smaller, Binzer says. Worm agrees, calling it a classic sign of overfishing as the bigger fish are caught and the smaller, younger ones are left.

That problem could worsen as the retreating ice makes fish more accessible. Fish stocks could rise as the warmer weather causes increased rain and melting ice to bring more nutrients for plankton, which the fish feed on, Worm says. He warns, however, that the fish may not behave as "predictably", as in the past, perhaps by seeking new food sources if they can no longer feed on the algae which grows under the sea ice.

Related ['Normal was left in the dust': El Niño may return this year and make the planet even hotter](#)

Few options beyond fishing

On his boat near Nuuk, Aargil considers another challenge: warm weather is making some fish harder to catch as they go deeper in search of colder waters. "It's too warm," he says, looking at the hills around the fjord. "I don't know where the fish is going, but there's not so much."

[Continued on page 49](#) ➔

Wednesday, 25 March 2026 GREEN

➔ [Continued from page 48](#)

Options beyond fishing remain few in Greenland. Tourism is increasing but far from making up a

significant part of the economy. Tradition, too, is at the heart of worries about climate change. Already, dog sledders have been confined to land when there is no

sea ice. "It's really important for many Greenlanders to have the ability to go out and sail," says Ken Jakobsen, the manager at Royal

Greenland's factory in Nuuk. Fishing is the "most important" thing. In the capital alone, he says, there are more than 1,000 boats in the

harbour during summer - in a territory where the total population is little over 50,000.