

Icebreaker captain: 'if you come to grief, you're up there alone'

As a new Polar Code is adopted to protect the Arctic, one veteran icebreaker captain tells all about the artistry of ice navigating

● Polar code agreed to prevent Arctic environmental disasters



📍 Captain David (Duke) Snider on his last voyage on the Mirai. Photograph: Captain David (Duke) Snider

There's an awful lot of artistry in being able to interpret the ice. Not everybody gets it. Just because you've been on the ice, doesn't mean you've picked up what it takes to understand it. Just because you did a computer-based training course on your laptop and correctly identified some ice in a computer game doesn't make you an ice navigator.

You have to understand the physics of ice, how it grows and how ice moves in the currents. Ice is not ice is not ice. As it ages, salt leaches out and the ice becomes hard and it also gets thicker.

Different types of ice look the same on the top in the same way oatmeal porridge looks like concrete. They have the same surface features, they are the same colour, then you cover them with snow and you really can't tell the difference.

Once you're in an ice field, you're manoeuvring constantly. Knowing that the ship that you're on by virtue of its ice class alone may or may not be able to transit that particular type of ice. Being aware of how that ship behaves becomes part of the artistry.

There's no doubt that once you get the polar bug, you've got it. Every time I go up there as an ice navigator I have a whole new crew of people who in most cases have never been there before and I love to see the awe on their faces when they see sea ice for the first time. And the absolute delight if they see a polar bear, or a walrus.

It's an incredibly fragile environment and that's why we have to ensure that if we are going to go up there more and more, which it appears we are, we have to do what we can to protect that environment. Going up there unprepared would be a wild ride. If you come to grief, you're up there alone.

If you don't have a robust Polar Code the outcomes are potential environmental disaster, potential major loss of life.

● Captain David 'Duke' Snider is a master mariner and ice navigator with 27 years at sea operating naval, commercial and coast guard vessels in the Arctic and Antarctic. He has been the author of and contributed to many ice regime shipping feasibility studies. He was talking to [Karl Mathiesen](#).