

Can a shape have finite area and infinite perimeter?

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QUE · Article 045 · Simple Questions, Deep Answers · Version 0.1 EN

Yes. A precisely defined mathematical boundary can have infinite length while enclosing a finite area. The apparent contradiction comes from treating two different measurements as if one had to grow whenever the other grows. A boundary can gain a great deal of length through increasingly small bends while adding progressively less area.

The Koch snowflake makes this distinction explicit. Its construction is useful because we can calculate every finite stage and then ask what happens in the limit. The answer concerns a mathematical object, not a claim that a physical coastline has structure at arbitrarily small scales. [1]

1. A rule that can be repeated

Begin with an equilateral triangle whose side length is s . Replace each side by four segments, each one third as long: retain the first and last thirds and replace the middle third by the other two sides of an outward-pointing equilateral triangle. Apply the same operation to every new segment. [1]

At stage zero the boundary has three sides. At stage one it has twelve; at stage two it has forty-eight. In general there are 3×4^n segments at stage n , and each segment has length $s/3^n$. Their total length is therefore $P(n) = 3s(4/3)^n$. This expression is a derivation from the stated rule, not an empirical fit.

Each stage multiplies the perimeter by $4/3$. The individual segments shrink, but their number grows faster. For any proposed finite upper limit on the perimeter, continuing the construction far enough produces a polygon with a longer perimeter. Every finite polygon still has finite length. The unbounded growth concerns the sequence, and the limiting boundary is not any one of those polygons.

2. Where the extra area goes

Let A be the area of the original triangle. At the first step we add three triangles of side $s/3$. Areas scale as the square of a linear dimension, so each small triangle has area $A/9$. The first addition is $A/3$.

At the second step twelve still smaller triangles are added. Each has area $A/81$, giving a total addition of $4A/27$. The next addition is $16A/243$. Each added-area total is $4/9$ of the previous one. Unlike $4/3$, this ratio is less than one.

The total area after n steps is $A(n) = A + (A/3)[1 + 4/9 + \dots + (4/9)^{(n-1)}]$. The expression in square brackets is a finite geometric sum. Taking its limit gives $A(\text{infinity}) = A + (A/3)/(1 - 4/9) = 8A/5$. This agrees with the standard calculation for the snowflake. [1]

For a concrete scale, if the starting triangle has area 100 square units, the limiting area is 160 square units. After two steps the area is about 148.15 square units. The perimeter has already grown by a factor of $16/9$, and can continue growing without bound. These numbers describe the ideal construction only.

3. Why the limit is a real mathematical claim

An endless instruction alone does not justify every property we might assign to its result. We need to specify what converges. Here the added features occupy progressively smaller spatial scales. Their largest displacements form a convergent geometric series, so the successive outlines approach a definite continuous limiting curve.

The growing polygonal lengths also correspond to genuine lower bounds for the length of that curve. The construction retains the vertices of earlier stages. Connecting an ordered finite selection of points on the limiting boundary produces a polygonal approximation. Curve length is defined by taking the supremum over such finite sums of distances. Because the retained stage- n vertices already give $P(n)$, and $P(n)$ is unbounded, the curve cannot have finite length.

This argument matters. In general, pictures that converge need not have perimeters that converge to the perimeter of the picture we think we see. Here the length conclusion follows from the retained vertices and the definition of length, not merely from an impression of increasing roughness.

Area behaves differently because each new contribution shrinks geometrically. Finite area and infinite boundary length are compatible properties under their respective definitions. Neither calculation cancels the other.

4. What an instrument would observe

A drawing, computer screen or manufactured object stops the construction after finitely many effective scales. Below a pixel, tool resolution or material scale, the mathematical instruction no longer describes an additional resolved feature. A measurement of a physical boundary must therefore specify how length was measured and at what resolution.

A finer ruler can reveal more boundary than a coarse ruler. That observation can motivate a model with scale-dependent length. It does not establish that the actual object is the infinite limit, or that the model remains valid beyond the scales tested. Measurement uncertainty and mathematical infinity are different issues.

Even a very accurate image cannot by itself distinguish every possible fine-scale continuation compatible with that image. A smooth curve, a finite intricate polygon and an ideal fractal can agree at the available resolution. Evidence about one range of scales should not silently become a claim about all scales.

5. The mistake in the quick answer

The common mistake is to imagine adding length only by expanding outward at a fixed scale. Under that restriction, more perimeter often accompanies more area. The snowflake relaxes the restriction: increasingly many features become increasingly small. Length and area then respond to different powers of the scale factor.

The result is exact within the construction. Its relevance to a physical object is a separate modelling question. We know how the ideal sequence behaves because we can prove it. Whether that sequence describes a measured boundary, over which scales, and with what deviations requires observations.

Related reading

Article 046, “Why can adding a road make traffic worse?”, also tests an intuitive claim about adding something by writing down the governing rule.

References

[1] American Mathematical Society, Graduate Student Blog. “Koch Snowflake.” 21 December 2013. <https://blogs.ams.org/mathgradblog/2013/12/21/koch-snowflake/>