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WWF-CANADA POSITION STATEMENT ON POLAR BEARS

There are an estimated 20-25,000 wild polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) in the world, and nearly two-thirds of them live in Canada in 13 identifiable populations. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species now lists polar bears as ‘Vulnerable’, due primarily to the accelerating melting of Arctic sea ice due to climate change. Of the world’s 19 populations of polar bears, five (all in Canada) are now declining, and recent indications are that a sixth (Southern Hudson Bay) is also in trouble. If current trends continue, polar bears will vanish from large portions of their Canadian range before the end of this Century.

Polar bears are marine mammals: their food comes from the marine ecosystem and they spend most of their time on sea ice. They have evolved a highly adapted lifestyle strategy to survive in some of the harshest conditions on our planet. They survive mainly on a diet of seals and other fat-rich marine mammals, which they catch from a sea ice platform. Climate change, caused mainly by rising emissions of greenhouse gases, is causing sea ice to thin and to vanish from increasing portions of the polar bear’s range for increasing periods during the spring and summer. This forces bears ashore for longer each summer, where they must fast until the sea ice returns. This is by far the main stress today on polar bear populations, with Inuit traditional knowledge and science studies already confirming, for some populations, significant declines in adult body condition, cub survival, and total population size. When onshore, polar bears are increasingly driven to search for food at Inuit food caches and in or near coastal communities, which presents major hazards for human security.

Other human activities also cause problems for polar bears. The long-range transportation of toxic chemicals such as DDT, dioxins and PCBs can interfere with reproductive and immune systems. Industrial development, such as for oil and gas and mining, threatens high-density polar bear maternity denning areas, such as the coastal plain of Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Hunting of polar bears (for Aboriginal cultural or subsistence purposes, or for sport hunting) has been a significant pressure on some populations, including in Canada. Over 80 percent of polar bear hunting in Canada takes place in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. Currently about 700 polar bears per year in Canada may be taken legally, mainly by Aboriginal hunters. WWF respects the traditions and rights of the Inuit to harvest polar bears, however such a harvest must be closely monitored and managed to ensure sustainability. In 2005, sport hunters took 76 polar bears in Nunavut. This provides important revenue for northern communities, as each polar bear taken by a sport hunter brings an average of \$15-20,000 into the community.



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However, there are cases where over-hunting has caused declines in some populations. In the Baffin Bay polar bear population, for example, government survey data show that over the past ten years, this population has declined by about 30%, due primarily to over-hunting in Greenland and Nunavut. WWF recommends a moratorium on any further hunting of this population until full population recovery can allow resumption of a truly sustainable, well-monitored and well-managed harvest.

Recent revised projections based on the IUCN data, and incorporating new analyses by the United States Geological Survey's scientists, as well as data and projections from NASA and the U.S. National Snow and Ice Data Centre, indicate that substantial reductions in polar bear quotas and other pressures will be necessary, due to accelerating threats to polar bears caused by global warming and loss of sea ice habitat. The IUCN Polar Bear Specialist Group concludes that some additional polar bear populations are very likely to decline over the next ten years if current warming trends continue, and, especially in regions of rapid sea ice retreat, some are highly likely to become regionally extinct by at least the middle of this Century.

WWF-Canada has supported many Inuit and scientific studies of Canadian polar bears over the past 30 years. We recognize that the polar bear is a flagship species at the top of the Arctic foodchain, and that it has great significance for Inuit and for humans elsewhere. WWF-Canada recognizes the traditional and current need, and rights, of Inuit to sustainably harvest polar bears. Unfortunately, the modern world now poses such major threats to the survival of polar bears, primarily through the melting of Arctic sea ice due to climate change, that hunting levels will need to be curtailed in order to ensure survival of many populations.

In order to ensure polar bear survival, WWF-Canada believes that all governments and societies must move swiftly to dramatically cut greenhouse gas emissions, to reach satisfactory short, medium and long-range targets that will help stabilise the world's climate and so reduce the rate of ice melting in the polar regions. In addition, well-integrated conservation management plans must be produced and then implemented to better manage all threats to the survival of polar bears, consistent with the 1973 International Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears and their Habitat. Until such plans are in place, no new industrial developments should be permitted in areas of importance to the survival of populations of polar bears.

For polar bear populations already depleted, or exhibiting signs of significant population stress due to melting sea ice habitats, any annual hunting quotas must be set at levels that allow bears to cope effectively with the cumulative stress of global warming and other pressures.



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For further information on polar bears and WWF's conservation work, see www.wwf.ca and

http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/what_we_do/species/about_species/species_factsheets/polar_bear/index.cfm

Main information sources:

1. IUCN (The World Conservation Union). 2006. Polar Bears. Proceedings of the 14th Working Meeting of the IUCN/SSC Polar Bear Specialist Group, 20-24 June 2005, Seattle, Washington, USA. Occasional Paper of the IUCN Species Survival Commission No.32. Pp. 190. (<http://pbsg.npolar.no/>)
2. USGS 9 updated scientific reports, Sept 2007, and 'Threatened' status of polar bears. http://www.usgs.gov/newsroom/special/polar_bears/
3. Stirling, I. & A. E. Derocher. 2007. Melting under pressure: the real scoop on climate warming and polar bears. The Wildlife Professional. (Fall 2007 issue). The Wildlife Society. USA.