

Extra Feature Story

Polar Bear Listed as Threatened Species

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Polar bears are now on the threatened species list after the Bush administration ruled Wednesday that their habitat near the Arctic Circle is deteriorating due to global warming.

Wildlife activists hoped the decision would require the government to protect the bears' habitat, including curbing greenhouse gas emissions and oil drilling in the Arctic.

But Wednesday's ruling, which came after months of delays, included provisions to prevent such measures, claiming that sea ice is melting because of global influences and that specific facilities or power plants could not be linked as the cause of the ice decline.

"Listing the polar bear as threatened can reduce avoidable losses of polar bears. But it should not open the door to use of the [Endangered Species Act] to regulate greenhouse gas emissions from automobiles, power plants, and other sources," said Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne.

A threatened population?

There are an estimated 20,000 polar bears living in the Arctic, which is a healthy population. But the polar bear's dependence on sea ice for survival makes it vulnerable.

The summer of 2007 saw record melting of sea ice in the Arctic, according to the National Snow and Ice Data Center, shrinking more than 1 million acres. The annual sea ice in the Arctic is also melting earlier in the spring and forming later in the year.

Polar bears hunt seals, their main source of food, by waiting near holes in ice for seals to come up for air.

When bears get stranded on land, they can't hunt and must live off of body fat, the Washington Post reported.

In 2007, the U.S. Geological Survey released a study concluding that two-thirds of the world's polar bears could be gone by 2050 because of the loss of ice.

"Our results have demonstrated that as the sea ice goes, so goes the polar bear," Steven Amstrup, a wildlife research biologist in Anchorage, Alaska, who led the study told the National Geographic.

The Endangered Species Act

The Endangered Species Act, passed in 1973, prevents the federal government from taking actions that harm protected species. The polar bear is the first animal officially threatened by global warming.

A species is considered endangered if it is in danger of extinction. A species is considered threatened if it is likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future. Endangered species are provided more protection under the law than threatened species.

Wildlife activist groups were hoping for an endangered listing for the polar bear.

Potential effects

Despite provisions exempting power plants and automobiles, conservationists will likely continue to argue that the listing should curb oil and gas development in the Arctic, and limit plans for new coal power plants

"If there are major federal actions that increase greenhouse gases, they would have to consider that they are negatively impacting species," Kert Davies, research director for [Greenpeace](#) USA told Salon.com, prior to the announcement.

Just this year, the Department of Interior sold \$2.6 billion worth of off shore oil leases for areas of the Chukchi Sea northwest of Alaska.

The only two polar bear populations in the United States are in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas.

Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer of California, the chairwoman of the Environment and Public Works Committee, accused the department of delaying the polar bear decision to allow the sale of the leases.

Interior Secretary Kempthorne denied the accusation, blaming delays on the complicated nature of the decision.

The government now faces a lawsuit from a California law firm.

"This listing of the polar bear really isn't about the polar bear," lawyer Reed Hopper told the Sacramento Bee. "This is a political ploy on the part of activist groups to try to hijack global warming policy from the hands of Congress and to put it into the hands of the courts."

Eskimo concerns

Some Eskimos, who are now largely known as the indigenous Inuit peoples, in Alaska and Canada argued against listing the polar bear, saying it could endanger their culture and livelihoods.

"It would have a really big effect on us Inuit, because we go by dog team to traditionally hunt polar bears," Jamie Kablutsiak, who guides U.S. trophy hunters, told USA Today. Inuit guides charge hunters up to \$30,000 for the privilege of shooting a polar bear.

However, the Alaska Nanuuq Commission, which represents the Inuit, supports the listing as long as it allows subsistence hunting (for food and clothing) to continue.

"It's in the best interest of the (Inuit) people out there to maintain the (bear) populations," Executive Director Charlie Johnson told USA Today.

-- Compiled by Talea Miller for NewsHour Extra

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