



## **WWF-Canada Statement on Polar Bears**

There are 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. 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 may vanish from large portions of their current 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 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 can catch from a sea ice platform.

Global warming, caused mainly by rising emissions of greenhouse gases, is causing sea ice to thin and to vanish from parts of the polar bear’s range for increasing periods during the summer. This forces bears ashore for increasing periods each summer, where they must fast until the sea ice returns. This is by far the main stress today for 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. Polar bears are increasingly being forced ashore 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 per cent 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 via a well-managed quota system (across seven Canadian Provinces and Territories) whereby communities can transfer allocated ‘tags’ to sport hunters if they choose. In 2005, sport hunters took 76 polar bears in Nunavut via this

arrangement, providing important revenue for northern communities (average of \$15-20,000 CDN per polar bear taken by a sport hunter).

The annual quota for a community includes kills of 'nuisance' bears, subsistence hunts and sport hunts. The current 'co-management system' for polar bears has been well monitored and enforced, with quotas based on current population information. But recent revised projections based on the IUCN data indicate that reductions in quotas may be necessary, due to accelerating stresses on polar bears caused by global warming. Hunting of polar bears in three populations shared with Greenland (Baffin Bay; Norwegian Bay; Kane Basin) appears to be unsustainable. The IUCN Polar Bear Specialist Group concludes that these populations are very likely to decline over the next 10 years.

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 everywhere. WWF-Canada recognizes the traditional and current need, and rights, of Inuit to sustainably harvest polar bears. However, the modern world now poses major threats to the survival of polar bears, primarily through the melting of Arctic sea ice due to global warming. The well-documented declines evident in polar bear populations are critical signals of great concern for the rest of the Arctic and for global ecosystem, climate and hydrological processes.

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*. For polar bear populations already depleted, or highly stressed by 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](http://www.wwf.ca) and [http://www.panda.org/about\\_wwf/what\\_we\\_do/species/our\\_solutions/priority\\_species/polar\\_bear/index.cfm?SID=91&LID=1&FH=O&SECTION=1](http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/what_we_do/species/our_solutions/priority_species/polar_bear/index.cfm?SID=91&LID=1&FH=O&SECTION=1)

**Main information source:**

IUCN (The World Conservation Union). 2006. Polar bears. Proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> 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/>)