

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Thursday, December 20, 2007

Petition seeks protection for ribbon seals

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- Frustrated by a lack of regulations to limit global warming, a conservation group is looking to spur action with the aid of Arctic animals.

The Center for Biological Diversity on Thursday filed a 91-page petition with the National Marine Fisheries Service to list ribbon seals as threatened or endangered because the seals' habitat - sea ice - is disappearing due to climate change brought on by humans.

"The Arctic is in crisis state from global warming," said biologist Shaye Wolf, lead author of the petition. "An entire ecosystem is rapidly melting away and the ribbon seal is poised to become the first victim of our failure to address global warming."

A message left by The Associated Press on Thursday with the federal fisheries service was not immediately returned.

It's the center's second attempt to use the Endangered Species Act to force action on global warming. Within weeks, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will decide whether to list polar bears as threatened because of habitat loss from global warming.

World climate experts who made up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported in February that global warming "very likely" is caused by human use of fossil fuels such as oil, gas and coal.

The Endangered Species Act requires animals to be listed as "endangered" if they risk extinction due to destruction of their habitat. A species is "threatened" if they're likely to become endangered.

Either listing would require federal wildlife managers to create a recovery plan that could address U.S. causes of global warming. When considering permits for development, other federal agencies could be required take action to avoid harm to threatened animals.

Attorney Brendan Cummings, ocean program director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said that without a national legal mechanism regulating greenhouse gases, his organization has turned to the Endangered Species Act. He acknowledged it's no "silver bullet."

"Absent action by Congress and this administration, it's perhaps the best law on the books to gain some benefits," he said.

The group's strategy is twofold, he said.

"One is to increase political, public and legal pressure on the Bush administration to squarely confront global warming and the reality that it's arrived in the Bering Sea and Alaska and the Arctic," he said.

Also, regulatory agencies are not considering changes in the Arctic before issuing permits, he said.

"Management decisions for things like oil and gas leasing are largely based on the fiction of a static Arctic that's not warming," he said.

The National Marine Fisheries Service manages ribbon seals. The animals are distinguished by the patterns of their fur - four white bands or ribbons encircling the head, base of the trunk and the two front flippers over a dark coat, a pattern that gives them the coloration of a panda bear.

Among marine mammals, ribbon seals may be the most dependent on sea ice, Cummings said. The rough estimate for the number of ribbon seals is about 240,000, he said.

During summer and fall, ribbon seals live in the water and feed on fish, squid and crustaceans in the Bering and Chukchi Seas. But from March through June, ribbon seals rely on loose pack ice in the Bering and Okhotsk seas for reproduction and molting, and as a platform for foraging.

Ribbon seals give birth and nurse pups exclusively on sea ice. Ice allows the seals and their young, which can't swim, to avoid predators. Newborn ribbon seals have a coat of soft, white hair called lanugo that provides insulation until the thick layer of blubber develops. Pups can only survive submersion in the icy waters only after they've formed a blubber layer.

Sea ice provides a dry platform necessary for pup survival during lactation, and after weaning, a resting platform when pups are learning to be proficient in water.

According to the petition, it's critical for ice floes used for pupping to remain stable until pups are independent. Weaned pups have poor swimming and diving skills because their hefty blubbers stores make them buoyant. They spend substantial time on sea ice as they slowly learn diving and foraging skills.

Adult ribbon seal adults molt from late April to June after pupping and mating. According to the petition, growth of new hair depends on high skin temperatures reached only when the seals are out of the water and on ice.

"Ribbon seals are never on land," Cummings said. "In all the records, there's maybe one or two accounts of a seal on the beach, and it's sick or emaciated."

The group predicts ribbon seals could be extinct by the end of the century without changes. Sea ice is breaking up earlier in spring and ice thickness has declined.

"The Arctic is imperiled and it's not just the polar bear. it's the entire ecosystem and the ribbon seal is part of that ecosystem," Cummings said.