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Starving polar bears shame Bush to act

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Starving polar bears are presenting an unprecedented challenge to George Bush's refusal to take action over global warming - and may succeed where environmentalists and other governments have failed in getting him to curb pollution.

Despite the President's obdurate stance on climate change, the US administration last week took the first steps towards officially listing the bear as an endangered species. The Arctic ice on which the iconic animal lives is melting away as the world heats up and, if the listing is finalised, the Bush administration will be obliged to modify its pollution policies to try to save the bear.

The move comes as the President faces attack for the first time over global warming from some of his strongest allies. Evangelical Christian leaders last week took out TV ads urging action, while, in Britain, Tony Blair has warned that the world has less than seven years to get to grips with climate change.

The Prime Minister made his statement on Tuesday, the same day the US Fish and Wildlife Service started the process of listing the polar bear in response to a lawsuit by environmental groups to get government protection for the species. It said the groups had presented "substantial scientific and commercial information indicating that listing the polar bear may be warranted".

The bears are vulnerable to climate change because they depend entirely on the polar ice to catch seals, their main prey. The seals swim too fast in open water, and so bears have to lie in wait for them to surface for air through holes and cracks in the ice. The seals congregate in the shallow waters of the continental shelves, and the bears can reach them only when the sea is frozen. But the ice now recedes far out to sea every summer.

A new report by the United Nations Environment Programme concludes that the extent of summer ice in the Arctic has shrunk by more than a quarter in the past half-century. The US government's official National Snow and Ice Data Center adds that a "stunning" reduction in sea ice has taken place in the past four years. Last summer an area twice the size of Texas disappeared.

The centre believes that the rate of retreat is accelerating. Worse still for the bears, the melting is starting earlier, depriving them of seals in the spring, when they have always stocked up on food to see them through the summer.

In desperation, more and more polar bears are swimming to land, and marauding through towns and villages. Made fearless by hunger, the half-ton animals have even broken into houses in search of food. One killed a 15-year-old girl in the far western Russian Arctic, while children in the northern Canadian town of Churchill are being taken to school under guard. There is even evidence from north-east Russia that polar bears have taken to eating their own species.

The Fish and Wildlife Service will gather evidence on the state of the bears over the next two months before coming to a decision at the end of the year. But Rosa Meehan, the head of its marine mammal programme in Anchorage, Alaska, has already said: "It's pretty easy to make a connection between what's happening to sea ice and what might happen to polar bears."

If the bear is listed under the US Endangered Species Act, regulatory agencies would be bound by law to take into account how their decisions would affect it. This could lead to tougher measures to control the spread of pollution that causes global warming, and stricter fuel-economy standards for vehicles.

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