

## Bear Necessities

Washington has to decide whether to protect polar bears under the Endangered Species Act. Inside the politics of the debate.



Steve Amstrup / AP

### **Will controlling greenhouse gases really help the polar bear?**

*By Daniel Stone | Newsweek Web Exclusive*

Polar bears pictured alongside large chunks of floating ice have quickly become iconic images in the fight against global warming. In January 2007 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service petitioned the Bush administration to give the species federal protection by listing it under the Endangered Species Act. Now, after 16 months of delays, a federal judge told Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne late last month that his department has just two weeks to decide whether to give the bears this status.

The decision, though, carries significant political overtones. There are now about 25,000 polar bears in

the Arctic, but scientists expect the number to decline by nearly 30 percent over the next half-century due to reduced habitat caused by melting ice caps. Listing the species as endangered would mean that Washington would be seen as acknowledging that humans have helped contribute to global warming and that they are able to play some part in fixing it. That, in turn, could require the administration to pass broad regulations limiting carbon emissions across all sectors of the economy—a far-reaching move in an effort to protect just a single species. Dr. Kenneth Green, a biologist and environmental scientist who is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, spoke with NEWSWEEK's Daniel Stone

about how climate change might have affected the bears and whether an “endangered” declaration would really help. Excerpts:

**NEWSWEEK: What decision is the Interior Department likely to make?**

Dr. Kenneth Green: The administration will likely list the bear as threatened. And after that they’ll punt it into the next administration, which will have to come in and start a planning process to develop a protection plan for the bears. I would expect there to be a conflict over the extent of the plan. Of course, if [the administration] chose not to list the polar bear, somebody would undoubtedly re-petition to relist the polar bear and all the regulatory timetables and clocks would start ticking again.

**In either scenario, what kind of political and legal debate would follow?**

Well, if protection is offered, environmental groups will file suit calling for suing carbon-emitting companies that violate the Clean Air Act. Then they’ll go back to court to sue the government for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Then a judge will have to say, “Well, will that do anything to improve polar bear habitat or not?” Then there will be a fight over what’s actually causing [the ice to] melt, and whether the climate models predicting deep rates of change are meaningful predictors.

**Is there apprehension that listing the bear signals acceptance that climate change is caused by humans?**

Absolutely. The realization has always been that if you list the polar bear, because its range is the entire Arctic, your ability to exploit the Arctic is essentially done. But that’s really only part of it. A much bigger part is that because the assumed nature of the endangerment is greenhouse gas emissions, it would empower groups to sue the government to force the abatement of the gasses.

**The polar bear has been labeled the canary of the planet’s coal mine. How closely is it really tied to the challenges of climate change?**

Its main pull is its charisma. It has a charismatic megafauna.

**So you see it as just one species of millions? It’s just cute?**

Yes. It’s being disingenuously used as a lever to try to get greenhouse gas emission controls in the back door of the Endangered Species Act, since the Bush administration has been unwilling to do so any other way. It’s not immediately obvious that the best thing to do to manage polar bear populations will be to control greenhouse gasses.

**But the number of them is decreasing, largely due to a shrinking habitat.**

The thing that nobody’s asking is “What’s actually earth’s right number of polar bears?” The answer is that there is no right answer. The real question is whether they’re being driven to extinction—and I don’t think the case has been made that whatever threats they face are of human causation. If the species is going extinct because of nothing that humans are doing, you don’t put them under the Endangered Species Act. The question is whether reversing the emission of greenhouse gasses is the best way to protect them, or would it be better to find more ways to increase their land-based habitat?

**Aside from limiting greenhouse gases, what would be other effective ways to protect the bear?**

[The government] could prohibit all hunting. I suppose there could be controlled breeding programs, for which we’d capture a significant portion of the population and try to increase their breeding in captivity, and then introduce them to land ice areas. Maybe things like establishing large reserves on land that would not be open to exploitation.

**What happens after the decision is made to list—or not list—the bear?**

The real fight will be over the elements of the protection plan.

**And what are some of the implications of that debate?**

It has implications over the use of the entire Arctic. If you list the bear, well, there goes [the option of drilling in] the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. With oil [soaring] and food prices rising to the point of causing famine and food riots, is this really a time we want to be setting aside what may be some of the world’s

largest oil reserves left? This is not like stopping a housing development for a small mouse. This is a huge question, and it's unlike anything we've dealt with before.

**But the ice is melting, and the bear's habitat is disappearing. Don't humans, at least in part, have some responsibility to stop that?**

I'm not saying it's not possible that humans are warming the Arctic, but I also haven't seen convincing evidence that we are, enough so to draw that conclusion.

**You've written that climate change is not a human problem and that humans can't do much about it. What about the other science that says, quite bluntly, that humans can help and that time counts?**

Regardless of what causes [polar ice melt], the answer should be to protect land-based habitat [instead of sea-based], because frankly it is implausible to think the world is going to turn around the trajectory of greenhouse gas emissions when the leading emitter, China, wants nothing to do with it. India, an up-and-coming emitter, wants nothing to do with it, and neither does Russia. The stage is not set for a reverse of the trajectory of greenhouse gas emissions. So no matter what you do with that, it's not going to have any benefit to the polar bear at all because it's not going to happen. [Those countries] won't be bound by our Endangered Species Act.

## So how do you protect land-based habitat of the bear?

The more important thing is to figure out how many polar bears there really are—get more empirical data on numbers and trends, because the data we have now is very sparse. This is not a matter of everyone calling for more studies. The fact is that data on the polar bear is remarkably sparse. Better data is important, and as part of that we need to identify what is critical coastal habitat.

**If melting ice is threatening the bear, shouldn't humans intervene anyway—regardless of what caused the warming in the first place?**

The latent extra degree of warming is already in the climate system from carbon emissions that have already been expelled. You're not going to be able to turn that around. Too late. People have this feeling that they

have control over this because they don't want polar bears to be injured. They don't want to see the species reduced in number. There's this hubris in human nature that says "We must be able to do something about it." But there are times that nature presents us with things we can't do anything about.

## If it's not shrinking habitat, what's the polar bear's biggest threat?

I don't think there's enough data to tell that. The information on polar bear trends is all modeled. It's just statistics. The most important thing to do is increase the focus on gathering data about the polar bears so we can make intelligent decisions rather than panicked decisions.

**Center for Biological Diversity Responds**  
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Dear editors,

The most disturbing thing about your May 5 polar bear piece is that it presents the views of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and Kenneth Green without any indication to the reader that AEI received more than \$1.5 million from Exxon between 1998 and 2005. AEI is part of the Exxon-funded global warming disinformation campaign that has successfully manufactured a false “debate” about global warming. The “debate” about the causes of global warming so prevalent in the media is absent from the scientific literature: it has been manufactured, wholesale, by Exxon and groups like AEI that lie to the American people about global warming in order to reduce support for regulatory solutions.

Mr. Green's garbled assertions about polar bears and the Endangered Species Act are incorrect. Polar bears are completely dependent upon the Arctic sea ice for all of their essential behaviors, including hunting their primary prey of ice seals, and cannot switch to a land-based existence. U.S. government scientists project a 67 percent decline in polar bear numbers by the middle of this century if greenhouse gas emissions trends continue, not 30 percent as reported.

Protecting polar bears under the Endangered Species Act, our nation's strongest and most successful law for the protection of plants and animals on the brink of extinction, will give the species help it desperately needs

to survive. When polar bears are listed, the government will have to designate and protect their critical habitat, prepare a recovery plan, and, all federal agencies will need to ensure that any action they authorize, fund, or carry out will not jeopardize the species. Because the leading threat to polar bears is global warming from greenhouse gas emissions, federal agencies will need to examine ways to reduce their major sources of emissions, as well as other threats to the polar bear like oil spills. It is high time that they do so, and high time for the media to stop uncritically repeating Exxon funded propaganda designed to block progress.

**Kassie Siegel**

Center for Biological Diversity

Joshua Tree,

*Kassie Siegel is climate program director for the Center for Biological Diversity, the author of the 2005 scientific petition to list the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act, and lead counsel on the lawsuit in which the administration has been ordered to issue a final listing decision by May 15.*