
Los Angeles Times

MAY 15, 2008

Editorial

Protecting polar bears

They're the first species to make the threatened list because of global warming, but the Interior secretary is undercutting his own decision.

Under legal pressure, Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne officially -- and historically -- added the polar bear to the threatened-species list, the first time a species has made the list because of global warming. His action Wednesday was extraordinary. Even more remarkable was Kempthorne's blatant undercutting of his own decision with regulatory shenanigans that will almost certainly mean no new restrictions on carbon emissions and no need to scale back on drilling for Alaskan oil.

Openly voicing disdain for the Endangered Species Act he's in charge of upholding, Kempthorne made it clear that although he was forced by the law to declare the bear threatened, he was frustrated that he couldn't avoid the listing on the grounds that the economic costs would be too high. But an imperiled species is just as imperiled no matter what the price of protection. Yes, this listing will involve difficult conversations about balancing human welfare with that of wildlife. Those are exactly the conversations we need to start having.

Kempthorne dutifully displayed maps showing a 39% decrease in Arctic ice -- vital to the bear's survival -- over the last three decades. He conceded that the melting was caused by global warming and that human activity contributes to the warming. He then went on to say that his implementation

of the new listing would include stipulations that no power plants or other carbon-producing projects could be linked to the bear's plight. And because the threat to the bear comes from warming, not habitat reduction, he said, the listing should not affect plans for oil drilling in its habitat, including the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

What we have here is a newly protected polar bear with virtually no new protections.

Kempthorne was right to say that the decision to list the bear was complicated. It would be ludicrous to curtail all human activities that produce carbon dioxide -- and they all do - - just because they threaten bears. But it makes a mockery of the Endangered Species Act to declare the threat to the bear official, and then officially undermine it.

There are years of study ahead, and the details will almost certainly be wrestled in court. And if the Department of the Interior will not start the conversation about protection for its newest threatened species, Congress should. The encouraging news is that the listing lays the groundwork for these steps-- and that Kempthorne, who has placed industry over the environment at nearly every turn, is in his waning months on the job.