Polar Bears Listed as Threatened Species in U.S.

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After delaying a decision for several weeks, the U.S. government today listed the polar bear as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), creating new protections for the bears in their Alaskan habitat.

But officials emphasized that the decision will not be used to determine U.S. climate policy.

At today's announcement, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne noted the dramatic decline of Arctic sea ice as the greatest threat to the bears.

Polar bears live in the Arctic and hunt seals and other fatty marine mammals from sea ice. They also travel, mate, and sometimes give birth on the ice.

But sea ice is melting as the planet warms, and it is predicted to continue to do so for several more decades. (Related: "Shrinking Arctic Sea Ice Thinner, More Vulnerable" [March 18, 2008].)

"Because polar bears are vulnerable to this loss of habitat, they are—in my judgment—likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future," Kempthorne said during a press briefing.

Many scientists say human-induced global warming is directly responsible for the melting sea ice and have called for limits on greenhouse gas emissions to stem the loss.

But Kempthorne said that science is not yet able to link specific activities such as carbon dioxide emissions from a coal-fired power plant to impacts on individual polar bears.

Therefore, regulation of greenhouse gases from power plants, automobiles, and other sources is out of the scope of this legislation, he said.

"That would be a wholly inappropriate use of the Endangered Species Act," he said. "ESA is not the right tool to set U.S. climate policy."

Mixed Reactions

As part of the announcement, Kempthorne invoked a section of the Endangered Species Act that stipulates activities permissible under the Marine Mammal Protection Act are allowed to continue under the ESA.

Because the U.S. classifies the polar bear as a marine mammal, the rule means that the bear's new threatened status will not impact oil exploration within its habitat.

Subsistence harvesting of polar bears and interstate trade in native handicrafts made from the animals will also be allowed to continue.

However, the listing means that import of polar bear products from Canada—where trophy hunting is still legal—will now be banned.

Reactions to today's announcement were a mixed bag of elation and frustration.

Scott Bergen is a landscape ecologist with the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society and a contributing author to a spate of U.S. Geological Survey studies released in 2007 that found two-thirds of the world's polar bears could go extinct by 2050.

He and other WCS staff are "almost elated" with the decision, he said.

"Even though it doesn't directly influence carbon emissions so to speak, we think it is a definite decision in the right direction and we're pleased to see the Fish and Wildlife Service is supporting the best science on this species," he added.

Kassie Siegel, climate program director with the Center for Biological Diversity in Joshua Tree, California, wrote the petition seeking U.S. protections for the polar bear.

"[The] listing is great news for the polar bear, there's no question about that," she said. "The Endangered Species Act provides broad and strong protection. I think it's a watershed moment."

However, she added, the Bush Administration's attempt to exempt regulation of greenhouse gases in plans to protect the polar bear is illegal and wrong.

"We will be continuing to fight for the full protections that the polar bear needs and deserves," she said.

In a telephone briefing with reporters prior to today's announcement, Margaret Williams of the global conservation organization WWF said ESA listing is an important tool in polar bear protections.

"The ESA listing will require that critical habitat be identified [and] that a recovery plan be put into place, and those are important steps forward," she said.

"However, the bottom line is that climate change and warming temperatures are changing the Arctic dramatically, and that is the overall issue we need to address."

Global Efforts

Kempthorne noted that tackling global climate change and the melting Arctic sea ice requires the efforts all major economies in the world to be effective.

"That's why I'm taking administrative and regulatory action to make certain that the ESA isn't abused to make global warming policies," he said.