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Great white hope

Polar bears have become totems of the battle against oil exploration in Alaska. Does this week's decision to list them as 'threatened' finally hand victory to the greens?

Richard Luscombe
in Barrow, Alaska

Polar bears in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. Photo: AP

Gilbert Leavitt pulls up his thick parka hood against the biting wind, revs up his snowmobile and ploughs on through the ice of the Arctic tundra in pursuit of a polar bear he saw at America's most northerly point a few days ago. As a part-time tour guide from the Inupiat tribe who inhabit Alaska's harsh northern coastline, 350 miles inside the Arctic Circle, he knows many of the favourite hang-outs of the world's biggest bear and the best time of day to catch one frolicking in the snow.

Today's expedition to Point Barrow ends in disappointment and a bumpy 15-mile ride back to town in subfreezing temperatures for the German tourist who accompanied Leavitt in the hope of a close encounter with the most fearsome resident of America's Last Frontier. "Just bad luck," his guide says. The bear, a large adult male, has, he believes, moved further along the ice pack in its endless quest for food.

If the scientists who study global warming are right, polar bears disappearing due to ice shrinkage is about to become much more of a problem in the Arctic - leading to the controversial decision by the US government this week to list the mammals as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Opponents claim bear numbers are at a historic high, having recovered from an estimated 5,000 in the early 1970s, a low caused largely by over-hunting, to about 25,000 today. Nineteen sub-species are spread across the five Arctic Circle countries, the US, Russia, Greenland, Norway and Canada.

However, with almost all experts agreeing that greenhouse gases and carbon emissions are raising sea temperatures and melting glaciers at a rate never seen before, polar bears are literally on thin ice. As the southern tip of the Arctic ice cap melts, so too do the bears' opportunities to hunt and build up the fat stores that keep them going over the summer, when they must survive on land. Predictions from the US Geological Survey point to two-thirds of the species being wiped out by 2050.

In announcing that the polar bear would become the first animal

entitled to protection due to climate change, the US interior secretary, Dirk Kempthorne, appeared to satisfy nobody. Environmental groups including Greenpeace say the ruling does nothing to reverse global warming and comes with loopholes that will not rein in the companies drilling for oil and gas in the Chukchi Sea, the bears' natural habitat off Alaska's northwest coast.

The petroleum industry predicts lawsuits from conservationists determined to prevent further drilling and exploration of the Arctic region.

And many of the 7,500 mostly Inupiat villagers who live along the Alaskan coast known as North Slope see the step as more unnecessary interference from outsiders that could change their way of life. "This listing isn't going to create more ice habitat, I just know it will affect our people disproportionately and it won't help the polar bear," said Richard Glenn, a subsistence hunter and whaling skipper who is also an ice scientist working in Barrow for the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, which represents the Inupiat.

"It'll turn our coastal villages into critical habitat, which means we're going to need a biologist's opinion when we want to build a playground, gravel pit, airstrip, landfill, campsite, or expand any of our villages and try to improve the quality of life for our people."

People and polar bears have co-existed here since the first humans arrived more than 5,000 years ago. The village of Barrow, with its frequent ice storms, blizzards and average winter temperature of -25C, is one of the most testing places to live on Earth, and has been at the centre of the debate surrounding polar bears and global warming for years. In 2002, a group of polar bears became stranded at Point Barrow when the winter sea ice receded prematurely. The Inupiat were upset to see "the great lonely roamer" rendered helpless in such large numbers.

The village, which will not see another sunset until early August due to its northerliness, relies heavily on residents who take to the ice each spring and autumn in tiny boats lined with seal skin to hunt bowhead whales. The hunt is dangerous and a constant battle against the elements. Exposed skin is frozen raw in seconds, accidents and injuries are common. But the reward is the whale meat that sustains the community through the brutal winter, and the skin and blubber, known as muktuk, saved as a delicacy for holidays.

Whale carcasses on the beaches also attract polar bears and occasionally one will wander too close to the hunters. A threatening bear is seen as fair game - for clothing, meat and bones to be carved into tools and souvenirs.

"Living up here we see polar bears all the time, but we don't just go out and shoot them unless we're in danger," said George Olemaun, North Slope's acting mayor while the incumbent, Edward Itta, is off whaling.

Olemaun said the endangered species ruling, announced 3,900 miles away in Washington DC, was seen as interference. "It's outsiders again telling us what we can do, what we can't, what we can eat and what we can do with our way of life.

"We've always depended on the land for our lifestyle. Polar bears were one of the dependable sources of food in Barrow. Things are changing, there's nothing we can do about that, it's just when people tell us what we can and can't do, that's when we say something. It's not for them to tell us what's good and what's bad," he said.

Subsistence hunting of polar bears still takes place in 15 native villages, and will be allowed to continue, under voluntary quotas set by the Alaska Nanuuq Commission. But even those numbers are down, to help conservation.

Charlie Johnson, chairman of the commission, which was set up in 1994 to give the villagers a voice in government and named after their word for polar bear, said the annual "take" had dropped from an average of 100 bears to the upper 50s.

"There are several reasons," he said. "We've been losing ice; a lot of the older polar bear hunters are passing on; and there are other materials available now for cold-weather clothes other than bear skins. It's much easier to purchase something from a catalogue. A lot of younger people don't like to eat them, either. There's more seal and walrus hunting."

Johnson, an Inupiat, is hopeful the listing will spark renewed enthusiasm for a polar bear recovery plan, and restoration of funding for his group that was recently cut from $400,000 (£205,000) to $80,000.

"It's an important step," he said. "Whether it's helpful or not remains to be seen. With the way things are warming up and the loss of ice, I think the horse is already

out of the barn, but we're hoping there will be some decisions about money, partnerships and a recovery strategy for polar bears and the people that use them."

Another important consequence of the threatened listing is a ban on the import of polar bear "trophies" into the US. Sport and commercial hunting in Alaska was outlawed by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, which was amended in 1994 to allow Americans on hunts in Canada's Northwest Territories to bring back the heads or skins of any bear they killed.

Wealthy tourists pay up to $40,000 to spend a few days in tents and on dog sleds pursuing polar bears in some of the world's most inhospitable terrain. According to the Department of the Interior, 967 permits have been issued to US citizens to bring home polar bear trophies since 1997. Inuit in Nunavut, Canada's largest territory, say they are already losing income from US hunters following their government's decision last year to cut the annual hunt quota from 56 to 38. The national quota is about 500 bears, in a country that considers them "of special concern", two steps below threatened.

A wider problem, environmental groups say, is unchecked poaching in the Chukotka region of Russia off the Bering Sea, said to kill more than 200 animals a year. "Hunting is a major source of mortality for bears," said Kassie Siegel, climate programme director of the Centre for Biological Diversity, which led a three-year legal campaign to force the US to list the polar bear.

Two hundred miles east of Barrow, the twice-daily jet service from Anchorage touches down at Prudhoe Bay and oil workers optimistically dressed in lumberjack shirts and baseball caps sprint to the airport hut to escape the swirling ice storm.

This bleak outpost is the hub of Alaska's burgeoning oil and gas industry and the top of the Trans Alaska Pipeline that pumps 750,000m barrels of crude oil a day south.

There were real fears here, among the workers of companies including BP, Exxon, Shell and Conoco, that the polar bear listing would shut down their operations in the Arctic Circle, including cancelling $2.7bn in leases auctioned by the US government in February for exploratory drilling in 4,300 square miles of the Chukchi Sea.

But Kempthorne made it clear in "guidelines" published with his ruling that it would not restrict the oil and gas industry in any way and that pre-existing protections for polar bears under the Marine Mammal Protection Act would take precedence. He also said he would not allow the Endangered Species Act to become a tool for changing US policy on global warming.

At a time of soaring oil prices, and with plans to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge thwarted by the US Senate last year, this was a clear boost for president George W Bush's energy policies.

Even so, the oil companies and their employees are not celebrating.

"We now have a species threatened, which is both healthy in size and population," said Marilyn Crockett, executive director of the Alaska Oil and Gas Association, which represents 17 companies.

"The real risk is litigation. Lawsuits will continue to be filed opposing individual operations, lease sales and permits, and that could have a significant impact on business up here."

Brian Fisher, from Nebraska, who works in construction at Prudhoe Bay in the winter and on pipeline maintenance during the summer, is also worried. "What happens to those promises when there's a new president in the White House next January?" he said. "I've got nothing against the polar bear, but it could shut us all down and my livelihood goes with it."

Meanwhile, the environmental groups who fought for the ruling say more work is needed. "The decision is a watershed because it has forced the Bush administration to acknowledge global warming's brutal impacts," said Siegel. "We'll keep fighting to save the polar bear."

Back in Barrow, whaling crews who have been out on the ice for days are heading back to shore after another freezing spring storm temporarily closed the narrow lanes of water the whales use. Their return prompts more lively debate about the impact of the polar bear listing. "I'm less concerned about oil and gas right now than what this is going to do to our village life," said Glenn. "The polar bear is an icon and because it's an icon people want to protect it. And they think that by claiming it as an endangered species they will help it. They'll sleep better at night - meanwhile our environment gets altered. We're the ones facing all the changes and legal ramifications negatively affecting the people who live along the coastline."