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## Palin's policies in Alaska weighted towards development

**She speaks of a balanced approach to wilderness protections, but has put energy exploration and hunting before struggling polar bears and other wildlife.**

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By Kim Murphy  
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BARROW, ALASKA — Federal scientists flying over the Arctic Ocean last month spotted something nearly unprecedented during their annual count of bowhead whales: nine polar bears in the open sea, miles from anywhere.

One was swimming 60 miles off Barrow. A flight a week or so later found five bears plying their way through the swells. The findings wouldn't have been so alarming -- they are powerful swimmers -- except that their likely destination, the sea ice on which the predators depend for survival, had retreated 400 miles offshore.

U.S. Geological Survey biologists believe that, if current climate-change trends continue, every polar bear in Alaska could be gone by 2050.

Yet Gov. Sarah Palin's administration has fought federal protections announced in May for polar bears, going to court to assert that the projections for a dramatic

shrinking of the bears' icy habitat are unreliable and that polar bears are already protected enough.

Since becoming the Republican vice presidential nominee this month, Palin has championed a balance between energy exploration and environmental regulation. A review of her record as governor shows that, most often, she has tilted that balance in favor of oil and gas development, mining and hunting -- the economic backbones of a state that many residents consider both a scenic treasure and an exploitable resource.

"From further oil and gas development to fishing, mining, timber and tourism -- these developments remain the core of our state," Palin told state legislators last year.

"We here in Alaska share concerns about wildlife, of course -- every Alaskan has concerns about wildlife," she later said. "We're going to continue to . . . make sure that polar bears survive, and thrive, for decades to come."

Since Palin became governor in



Sources: ESRI, USGS

MARK HAFFER *Los Angeles Times*

2006, the state has sought to ramp up a program that encourages the shooting of wolves from aircraft in areas where they compete with human hunters for moose, caribou and deer.

Federal law prohibits aerial hunting of wolves, which can involve planes chasing wounded and terrified animals until they can't run anymore. But a loophole allows Alaska to impose "airborne predator management" across 60,000 square miles. Palin sought last year to

significantly raise the number of wolves killed under the program by putting a \$150 bounty on dead wolves, until a judge blocked the payments.

Palin alarmed conservationists further last month when she came out against a ballot initiative that would have prohibited the discharge of toxic mining waste into some of the nation's last wild-salmon rivers. The measure failed.

The governor also has been a vocal advocate of drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge -- something the GOP presidential nominee, John McCain, opposes -- and she favors offshore exploration in the vast, often-frozen waters of the Beaufort and Chukchi seas. A spill there, conservationists say, would be virtually impossible to clean up.

"When you look at her record in the context of what other states have done, including states with Republican governors, her record is weak, and I'd even say ominous in some areas like drilling," said Kate Troll, executive director of Alaska Conservation Voters.

But Palin insists that with Alaska's record of environmental regulation, it can develop its oil and mineral resources without compromising America's last great wilderness.

"Alaskans must feel confident that yes, we do have the best permitting system in the nation," she said recently.

Palin has committed \$250 million in state funding over the next five years to developing alternative energy sources. And environmental groups applauded her when, early in her term, she took responsibility

for wildlife habitat protection away from the development-friendly Department of Natural Resources.

But conservation groups say Palin's position on climate change -- that it is a measurable reality but not necessarily man-made -- defies scientific consensus.

"Palin's insistence that Arctic melting is 'uncertain' is like someone debating the theory of gravity as they plunge off a cliff," Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a recent statement.

Two years of record-breaking shrinkage of the sea ice has set off a global race for oil, gas, fishing and shipping rights in the newly navigable Arctic. That competition alarms scientists, who already have seen an increase in the number of polar bears denning perilously near the busy oil fields of the North Slope.

Just as worried are Alaska's Inupiat Natives, who depend on the icy coastal waters for the bowhead whales and seals that have been mainstays of their existence for generations.

"When she got on TV and talked about how she wanted to develop all the offshore and [the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge], she just blew us away, talking like that," said George Edwardson, president of the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, which represents Native populations across the Alaskan north.

In Barrow -- a treeless expanse of squat houses and spacious schools and clinics (paid for with oil money) perched on the confluence of the Beaufort and Chukchi seas -- there

is support for Palin's fight against federal protection for the polar bears. Many Native Alaskans fear that once polar bears are listed, the government will put up roadblocks to their hunting of other marine wildlife.

All summer, there have been signs here that the polar bears -- which normally would be hunting seals off chunks of sea ice -- are retreating ashore in increasing numbers. At least 13 bears have been spotted around town, sniffing at moose meat drying in yards, and lumbering along the beaches in search of washed-up carcasses.

Posters warn citizens against leaving garbage exposed or allowing children to play unattended.

Earlier this month, a polar bear was spending its time leisurely near Point Barrow, swimming along the shore and frolicking on the AstroTurf field where the high school football team plays. After a few days, however, the bear's half-skinned carcass was found lying on the sand. North Slope Borough Mayor Edward S. Itta said the animal had been shot by a village youth as a precaution to protect children playing near the beach.

Villagers increasingly are seeing signs of bears swimming to shore exhausted. Not long ago, Itta said, a mother and two cubs crawled onto the beach and lay immobile for two days.

"They obviously had to struggle to get there," Itta said. "You know, it's Mother Nature running its course. It can seem to be very cruel sometimes, but that's just the nature of our land up here. It's not forgiving."

In July, scientists found the carcass of a drowned polar bear washed ashore 70 miles west of here.

“There’s a lot of bears in the water right now. . . . Some of them could be dead, drowned already, or they could still be trying to swim to shore,” said Rick Steiner, a University of Alaska professor in the marine conservation program.

The Palin administration has argued that it is premature to declare the bears threatened, given that their worldwide numbers have increased substantially since they stopped being widely hunted in the 1970s.

Moreover, state officials argue, there is no way of knowing whether climate change will shrink the ice pack over the next 40 years to the extent federal scientists fear.

“We don’t think you can look much beyond a 10- [to] 15-year horizon in trying to assess climate-related impacts,” said Doug Vincent-Lang, the state’s endangered species coordinator. “And within this more reasonable foreseeable future, we really don’t feel the legal thresholds for a listing that the bears will either become extinct or threatened . . . can be met.”

Steiner spent months pressing the Department of Fish and Game for public documents discussing the state’s positions on polar bear protection and wolf control. The state’s response? A bill for \$468,784 to cover its costs for looking for the material. Steiner eventually obtained the e-mails free, and one confirmed what he had suspected all along: that the department’s own marine mammals staff considered the bears to be in peril.

“The finding that the polar bear will decline significantly across much of its range is correct,” the department’s leading marine mammal expert wrote to his superiors.

In Barrow, most residents seem to believe there are still plenty of polar bears. But the weather in the Arctic is far from normal, they say.

“When I was growing up, we had snow shortly after school started and the first frost somewhere around September. Now look at it: We’re in September and it seems like August weather,” said Marie Carroll, a longtime resident.

“We know there’s a problem, but we didn’t create it,” she said. “For all the mistakes down south, they’re making us pay here.”

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