

Polar bear threat recognised

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POLAR bears may be listed as threatened with extinction, the US have said, marking the first time the Bush administration has singled out climate change as the driving force behind the loss of a species.

The proposal by the Interior Department's US Fish and Wildlife Service is linked to the fact that rising temperatures in the Arctic are reducing the sea ice that polar bears need for hunting.

"The significance here is that polar bears are being recognised as a threatened species and obviously climate change is a factor in this thing," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"At the Interior Department, to the best of our knowledge, we have not had a species that's been listed with such a close correlation to climate change as this one.

"This is about as close a correlation between rising temperatures and a species," he added.

"This is pretty unique, especially considering the whole debate on climate change and what causes it."

There are between 20,000 and 25,000 polar bears worldwide, 4,700 of which live in Alaska, and environmental groups for years have raised the alarm about their possible extinction because of global warming.

Warmer temperatures have caused the ice cap to melt, shrinking the bears' hunting grounds and making it increasingly difficult for them to find food.

Identifying polar bears as threatened under the Endangered Species Act could force US industries to reduce their carbon dioxide output to protect the Arctic predators.

The proposed rule aimed at protecting the bears was prompted by a petition filed by three environmental groups- **the Center for Biological Diversity**, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and Greenpeace- which charged that the US government was not acting quickly enough to address the issue.

"This is a watershed decision in the way this country deals with climate change," **Kassie Siegel, director of the Center for Biological Diversity, told AFP.**

"The science of global warming and the impact to polar bears are so clear that not even the Bush administration can deny that polar bears are threatened with extinction because of global warming."

Andrew Wetzler, a senior attorney at NRDC, said Wednesday's proposal was long overdue and would force the government to seriously address the plight of polar bears.

"The time for half-measures and delay is over," he said. "We must face the scientific warnings and address the challenge now."

The US government now has one year to seek public comment on its proposal before deciding on whether to officially list the species as threatened, the Interior Department official said.

"It's not a foregone conclusion that the species will be listed," he said. "There actually is a lot of science left to be done."

However experts say it is highly unlikely that the proposal will not go through, since the government has already received more than 200,000 comments in support of listing the polar bear.

The United States is the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, the byproduct of fossil fuels blamed for trapping heat from the Sun and altering Earth's delicate climate system.

Since taking office in 2001 US President George W. Bush has come under heavy criticism by environmental groups for failing to ratify the Kyoto protocol on global warming.

