

Decision on polar bears' endangered status delayed

Missed deadline leaves polar bear off Endangered Species List

By Steve Graff

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Normally, men from a native Arctic tribe follow Julianne Stroeve around with rifles -- a safety precaution for the Boulder research scientist, who's usually busy measuring ice thickness and snow depths.

But one day a couple of years ago, with no local tour guides and just one rifle, Stroeve and her research partner returned to a ravaged camp site to find colorless hairs and paw prints left behind by the world's largest land carnivore: the polar bear.

"It was a little unnerving," said Stroeve, who studies sea ice conditions in the Arctic for Boulder's National Snow and Ice Data Center. "You don't want to surprise them and you don't want them to attack you."

"They are hungry bears, and they are only getting more desperate."

It's the kind of desperation that prompted a conservation group in 2005 to seek legal protection from the government for the polar bear and its habitat, stating that sea ice, the primary feeding ground for the species, was receding at

alarming rates and killing off the population.

Any day now, the Bush administration and the Department of the Interior are expected to announce the overdue decision that could officially recognize the first victim of global warming.

A question of protection

The verdict, which legally should have been made the first week of January, will come after a year of deliberations by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a bureau of the Interior department, and three years after the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity submitted a petition to list the polar bear as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The petition blamed a warming planet for shrinking the animal's habitat, stranding bears on land and out at sea with no access to food, as well as leaving less time for them to feed and store fat for the months they spend ashore before the ice refreezes.

The official listing process started

in January 2007 when the Fish and Wildlife Service published a proposal in response to the petition and subsequently rounded up 14 climate scientists and wildlife experts from around the globe to review it.

Julianne Stroeve was one of them.

Stroeve, whose research is quoted in the proposal several times, said she was happy to lend a hand, but had one issue: "How is listing them going to protect (them), if the ice is going to melt anyway?"

Stroeve said all the ice will most likely be gone in 10 to 20 years, especially if we keep having hot summers.

Despite her predictions, she said the listing would help bring attention to climate change. (It could also limit gas and oil exploration in the Arctic

Polar bear facts

Average male size: Nine feet long, 1,000 pounds

Fur: Appears white, but is actually translucent

Diet: Mostly seals

Top speed on land: 25 mph

Longevity: 15 to 18 years

Number of polar bears today: About 22,000

Number predicted in 50 years: About 7,500

Sources: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; U.S. Geological Survey; www.bear.org

region since the habitat, if listed as critical, would be subject to greater restrictions.)

But when January of this year rolled around, with all but one of the reviews in, the Department of the Interior announced it would miss the one-year deadline and postpone its decision.

Bruce Woods, a Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman in Anchorage, Alaska, said there's a substantial amount of complex material and more than 200,000 public comments to review.

"Everyone involved realizes it is a significant decision — and really ground-breaking," he said. "There is a level of expert care to make sure all the i's are dotted and t's are crossed."

Delays continue

A news release dated Jan. 7 said the agency was "working diligently to reach a final decision," and

expected to announce an answer within 30 days.

That extension expired this week.

"It is outrageous," said Kassie Siegel, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity and lead author of the petition.

Her organization, along with Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defense Council, has sent a notice of intent to sue to the Interior department because of the missed deadline.

"It's political interference from the Bush administration," Siegel said. "The scientists have done their job. There is no reason for the delay."

In the meantime, evidence of the problem is piling up as fast as the ice melts.

Last summer's Arctic sea ice set a new record low, according to a study from National Snow and Ice Data Center, and just last month,

Boulder's Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research concluded that the ice caps on Baffin Island are the smallest they have been in 1,600 years.

For now, it's a waiting game.

The Department of the Interior can't make an official announcement until the Fish and Wildlife Service makes its recommendation, department spokeswoman Valerie Fellows said.

So when will the decision be made?

"That's the million-dollar question," she said.