

## **ENVIRONMENT: Polar Bears in Limbo as Drilling Leases Go Forward**

By Stephen Leahy

**BROOKLIN, Canada, Mar 11 (IPS) - A coalition of environmental groups sued the George W. Bush administration Monday for delaying a decision to protect polar bears threatened with extinction due to the melting ice in its Arctic habitat. Polar bears could be the first species officially threatened by climate change.**

The huge loss of summer sea ice in 2007 has caused many scientists to project that the Arctic could be ice-free in summer by as soon as 2012. Although excellent swimmers, polar bears are not very good at catching seals in the water. Seals comprise the main diet for these giant bears, which are far larger than their grizzly bear cousins.

While legally required to make a decision Jan. 9, US Fish and Wildlife (U.S. FWS) officials have been silent. Meanwhile on Feb. 6, 2.6 billion dollars in oil and gas leases were auctioned off to energy companies on nearly 30 million acres of prime polar bear habitat in the Alaska's Chukchi Sea.

"Coincidence? I doubt it, but I don't have the smoking gun to prove it," said Kassie Siegel of the Centre for Biological Diversity (CBD), an environmental non-governmental organisation based in Joshua Tree, California.

The CBD, along with Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defence Council, filed the suit for missing the legal deadline for issuing a final decision on whether to list the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act due to global warming.

"There was absolutely no urgency to hold that lease sale and plenty of public opposition to it as well," Siegel told IPS.

Had U.S. FWS listed polar bears as threatened on Jan. 9, then the Chukchi Sea lease sale could not have gone ahead without some studies to assess the potential impacts on polar bears, she said.

Should the polar bears be listed as threatened in the near future then the U.S. government has an obligation to protect their habitat and that might mean having to buy back the Chukchi leases from the energy companies, and at a premium price. The Centre for Biological Diversity has also filed a lawsuit over the lease sale but that could still mean U.S. taxpayers would have to pay the energy companies for those leases, says Siegel.

These lawsuits, which first commenced in 2005, have much more to do with climate change than protecting polar bears, the environmental groups acknowledge. It's a roundabout way of getting the U.S. government to cut emissions of greenhouse gases. If polar bears are threatened by climate change, then U.S. federal agencies are obligated under the Endangered Species Act to reduce their emissions of the climate altering gases.

"It's no substitute for a federal cap on emissions, but it's something," Siegel said. "We're not going to magically reduce our emissions with a snap of our fingers. We need many solutions."

Although the Arctic region is being transformed by climate change that will only worsen, there is intense opposition to listing polar bears as threatened in Alaska by many native peoples in Canada. U.S. trophy hunting of polar bears is a 2-million-dollar a year business for the Arctic region of Nunavut in northwest Canada.

Canada is home to 60 percent of the world's estimated 20,000 to 25,000 polar bears. Nearly hunted to extinction in the 1970s, polar bear populations have rebounded thanks to strict hunting quotas. However, recent studies of some polar bear groups over the vast Arctic region show poor survival rates for cubs and adults that are much lighter in weight than in the past.

That's not the case for the bears in parts of Nunavut, according to Government of Nunavut's wildlife officials. Davis Strait, one of their southern-most roaming grounds, is "crawling with polar bears", Mitchell Taylor, director of wildlife research, told the Nunatsiaq News last fall. By Taylor's estimates, there may be 1,500 more bears in the region than previous counts.

However, the greatest Arctic ice losses have been mostly confined to the western Arctic, not the southern region as commonly supposed. And that's the area where the bears have been hit hardest -- the Beaufort Sea and the Western Hudson Bay populations, according to Andrew Derocher of the University of Alberta, and head of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Polar Bear Specialist Group.

Monitoring a few thousand white bears on white snow and ice over an area twice the size of the continental U.S. is challenging to say the least. Derocher has told IPS in previous interviews that experts do not have good data on some of the bear populations. However, what satellite pictures make very clear is that the ice in the region is deteriorating and very quickly, he said.

That loss of ice will affect the bears, and whether they can adapt to the fast changing conditions by finding different food sources is an open question. It could be argued that opening up their territory to oil and gas drilling may be a more direct and immediate threat than climate change.

According to environmentalists, the U.S. government has received approximately 670,000 comments in support of protecting the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act, including letters from eminent polar bear experts, climate scientists, and more than 60 members of Congress.

"If the federal government is really serious about protecting the polar bear, then its next steps will be to cancel lease sales in the Chukchi Sea and immediately implement a plan for deep cuts in U.S. global warming pollution," said Kert Davies, research director at Greenpeace USA, in a statement.