


Polar plight: Bears are endangered, should be protected

 It shouldn't be too difficult. The decision whether or not to list a plant or an animal as endangered should be based on science, as indeed it is in the Endangered Species Act. Trouble is, the act itself appears endangered by politicians for whom science is an obstacle.

The act specifies the conditions under which the survival of an animal can be considered in jeopardy. Scientists decide whether those conditions exist for any threatened species.

Take the polar bear, for example. Scientists know that the bears are in trouble, and they know it is because the sea ice on which they live is melting. Summer ice decreased 8.59 percent per decade between 1979 and 2006. At this rate, the Arctic Ocean sea ice will disappear by 2060, sooner if the rate escalates.

Since polar bears depend on sea ice to hunt, breed and travel, the loss of it seems an obvious threat to their survival. The Center for Biological Diversity makes this point in its 154-page petition for listing polar bears as endangered. The National Fish and Wildlife Service concurs.

But Alaska's new governor and a majority of its legislators oppose the listing, and it's easy to see why. They are concerned about the survival of the state's royalties and taxes coming from the oil industry - 85 percent of the state's general fund - and a proposal to build a gas pipeline to the lower 48 states. A polar bear recovery plan might hinder Alaska's oil and gas development, so Alaska officials claim the petition to list the bear as endangered is nothing more than a ploy by conservationists. They say the bear is being used as a poster animal by climatologists trying to drum up concern about climate change caused by burning of fossil fuels, which is probably true, as far as it goes.

But the officials in Alaska also make the specious claim that human-caused global warming is unproven and unfounded, despite a global consensus among experts to the contrary. Not only is their argument insupportable, it is beside the point. No matter the cause, the bear's habitat is disappearing, endangering not only this top-of-the-food-chain predator, but the Arctic ecosystem that is its home.

Politicizing the Endangered Species Act for the sake of the fossil fuels that are driving the climate change that threatens the polar bear - and the rest of us - isn't just unscientific. It is colossally myopic.