

Polar bears caught in a heated eco-debate

By Oren Dorell
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Eskimos in Alaska and Canada have joined to stop polar bears from being designated as an endangered species, saying the move threatens their culture and livelihoods by relying on sketchy science for animals that are thriving.

Although they say sea ice has melted, some Natives question the accuracy of the most dire predictions of a warming climate in the Northern Hemisphere, and members of the Inuit Circumpolar Council seek evidence that a change would seriously harm the bears.

Their stance has put them at loggerheads with a usual ally: environmentalists who say the bears need protection now to survive a warmer climate in the future.

“It would have a really big effect on us Inuit, because we go by dog team to traditionally hunt polar bears,” said Jamie Kablutsiak, who guides U.S. trophy hunters for big money onto the ice on Canada’s Hudson Bay. As for the bears, “I don’t think they’re decreasing because there’s usually lots, even in summer time,” he said.

A decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will come soon, spokesman Bruce Woods said.

The petition marks the first time a healthy species would be considered at risk under the Endangered Species Act and the first time global warming



By Paul Richards, AFP/Getty Images

A polar bear with her cub on the edge of Hudson Bay outside Churchill, Manitoba, Canada, in November 2007.

would be officially labeled a species’ main threat.

Polar bears have increased from a population of 5,000 in 1972 to between 20,000 and 25,000 today.

The Center for Biological Diversity submitted a petition in 2005 for endangered species protection based on projected habitat loss due to global warming.

The petition resulted in a 2007 report by the U.S. Geological Survey, which predicted a loss of two-thirds of the world’s polar bear population by 2050, based on a projected 42% summertime loss of “optimal polar bear habitat” such as shallow-water sea ice.

Some scientists, however, question predictions that sea ice will disappear,

and even that polar bears would disappear if it did.

Richard Glenn, an Alaskan Inuit hunter and ice researcher, told U.S. senators in January that “marginal ice,” which freezes in winter and melts in summer, will grow as multiyear ice disappears.

“Even the Fish and Wildlife Service study acknowledges that ... may be beneficial to ice seals and polar bears,” he said.

The aim of the environmentalists is to use the Endangered Species Act to force the U.S. government to take action on global warming, said Kassie Siegel, a lawyer for the Center for Biological Diversity. It would require federal agencies “to look at the cumulative effect of greenhouse gases

on polar bears” and limit emissions by cars and power plants, Siegel said.

Alaskan Gov. Sarah Palin disagrees with that approach.

“If you want to address climate change, address it directly,” said Doug Vincent-Lang, Palin’s coordinator for endangered species.

To the Inuit, the polar bear has been a source of food, clothing and income for millennia, said Duane Smith, president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council in Canada, which represents Inuit across Canada.

The Inuit Circumpolar Council, which represents Native communities in Greenland, Canada, Alaska and Russia, wants Fish & Wildlife not to make a decision until Natives have a greater role, Chairwoman Patricia Cochran said. Any decision should be based on “sound science,” which includes traditional knowledge, Cochran said.

Big money is at stake. Sport hunters pay between \$25,000 and \$30,000 each to bag a polar bear.

The Alaska Nanuuq Commission, which represents Eskimos on polar bear issues, supports the listing as long as it allows subsistence hunting by Alaskan Inuit to continue. Executive Director Charlie Johnson said the group chose to avoid clashing with U.S. environmentalists.

The conservation scheme works because “it’s in the best interest of the (Inuit) people out there to maintain the (bear) populations,” Smith said. But it may end if the bear is listed because U.S. hunters will be banned from importing any part of the bear, such as a pelt, Smith said.

“The numbers of polar bear are good,” said Smith, a former conservation officer for the Canadian government.

Steven Amstrup, chief polar bear

researcher for the U.S. Geological Survey, said climate models predict that it will be warmer by midcentury than “ever in the course of polar bear evolution.” Other scientists question that view.

Willie Soon, an astrophysicist at the Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, said far too few data were used to make predictions about both climate change and polar bear behavior and populations.

“We looked at historical studies. The first thing you notice is the whole climatic system undergoes huge fluctuation,” Soon said.

Over the possibly 200,000 years the polar bear has existed as a species, it has survived “very harsh conditions” of extreme cold, such as ice ages, and warmth, such as the last interglacial period, 100,000 to 110,000 years ago, Soon said.