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Breathing Room for the Bear

EDITORIAL

The Obama administration's proposed designation of 200,000 square miles of Alaskan waters and sea ice as critical habitat for the polar bear is not just encouraging news for the bear. It signals a more sympathetic attitude toward endangered species, and is further evidence that the secretary of the interior, Ken Salazar, will take a more measured approach than the Bush administration to oil and gas drilling in the Arctic.

After much prodding by the courts and its own scientists, the Bush administration listed the polar bear as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in May 2008. But it deferred the required designation of protected habitat — the area deemed essential to the survival of a threatened or endangered species — partly because doing so could have torpedoed its grand plans to open millions of acres of prime polar bear territory in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas to oil and gas exploration.

Mr. Salazar is now reviewing those plans. Though a pre-existing Shell Oil lease in the Beaufort will be allowed to go forward, it seems highly unlikely that Mr. Salazar would authorize major oil and gas development in territory that his own Fish and Wildlife Service has identified as crucial to the bears' future.

The designation of critical habitat does not automatically bar commercial activities like oil and gas drilling. It does mean that such activities, if they occur on federal land or require a federal permit, cannot go forward without intensive review by agencies like the Fish and Wildlife Service, which can limit them or prohibit them.

The biggest threat to the bears is, of course, the gradual disappearance of the sea ice where it lives and hunts, which in turn is linked to global warming. The Endangered Species Act is not designed to solve the problem of climate change, a global problem. It can relieve an already-burdened animal of the added stresses that widespread drilling would surely bring.