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Demise of polar bear sport hunt looms

GN lashes out at hated Greenpeace group

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The U.S. government took the next step late last month in a process whose likely outcome spells big trouble for Nunavut's \$2.9-million-a-year polar bear sports hunt: a proposal by their federal Fish and Wildlife Service to list the species as "threatened."

Dirk Kempthorne, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, issued the announcement Dec. 27, citing widely accepted scientific research that shows climate change now poses a dangerous new threat to the health of many polar bear populations.

"We're making this proposal because the scientific review of the species by the fish and wildlife service found that populations may be threatened by receding sea ice," Kempthorne said from Boise, Idaho, in a conference call with reporters.

The announcement is a response to a petition launched in February of 2004 by an environmental organization called **the Centre for Biological Diversity**. In December of 2005, two other groups, the Natural Resources Defence Council and Greenpeace U.S.A., joined the effort and helped launch a lawsuit against the U.S. government.

Those groups say shrinking sea ice threatens polar bear populations. Their goal is to force the Bush administration to acknowledge the reality of climate change and adopt policies aimed at reducing the greenhouse gases that cause global warming.

Those groups are now declaring victory, because they believe they've forced the Bush administration to stop denying the science that reveals the true extent of global warming.

"It's an affirmation that global warming is real," **Brendan Cummmings, a lawyer for the Centre for Biological Diversity, told the Guardian newspaper last week.**

But Inuit hunters in Nunavut, caught in the middle of this fight, could end up as collateral damage.

That's because if environmental groups and scientists succeed in getting the U.S. to list polar bears as "threatened," it's likely the U.S. government would then look at a ban on the importation of polar bear trophies into their country.

Most non-Inuit polar bear sports hunters are U.S. citizens who pour thousands of dollars into Inuit communities like Resolute Bay, Grise Fiord and Arctic Bay, to pay for guided hunts.

In a recent study, George Wenzel of McGill University estimates sports hunters spend \$2.9 million a year in Nunavut. Of that, about \$1.5 million goes to Inuit.

Patterk Netser, Nunavut's environment minister, lashed out last week at the U.S. proposal and at the environmental groups who lobbied for it.

In a press release issued Dec. 20, Netser invoked the name of the hated Greenpeace group, the most reviled environmental organization in Nunavut, a place where environmental organizations aren't very popular at the best of times.

Patterk said the behaviour of environmental groups involved in this issue reminds him "of the destruction of the Inuit sealing economy by Greenpeace in the 1980s."

Patterk said the GN will, within 90 days, make a submission opposing the U.S. proposal.

Netser said there are "plenty of bears" in Nunavut and that they're doing fine, claiming that 11 of the 12 polar bear populations hunted by Nunavummiut are stable and increasing, especially the Davis Strait population.

But a majority of polar bear scientists do not agree with the GN's assessment.

For example, the Polar Bear Specialist Group, made up of polar bear scientists and wildlife managers from around the circumpolar world, claim the Baffin Bay and western Hudson Bay populations are each in decline.

As for Davis Strait, they say there's not enough information about that population to make an informed estimate.

So in January of 2005, when Nunavut increased annual polar bear hunting quotas from 398 to 507 bears, the decision provoked an immediate backlash from a majority of polar bear scientists.

The minutes of the Polar Bear Specialist Group, who met in Seattle in 2005, say many scientists had "a definite high level of uneasiness" with GN population estimates based on traditional Inuit knowledge, as well as with Nunavut's big increase in hunting quotas.

In particular, the scientists don't like the GN's decision, based almost entirely on traditional Inuit knowledge, to increase the Baffin Bay sub-population quota from 64 bears to 105.

They also don't like the GN's decision to increase the annual quota in another sub-population, western Hudson Bay, from 47 to 56.

Inuit, backed by the Government of Nunavut, claim the bear population there has risen from about 1200 animals to 1400. But scientists, especially Ian Stirling of the Canadian Wildlife Service, claim that between 1987 and 2004, the western Hudson Bay population dropped from about 1200 animals to 935, a 22 per cent decline.

Stirling and his collaborators say shrinking sea ice forces polar bears to spend more time on dry land, without easy access to food, making them weaker and less healthy. They say fewer cubs and fewer young bears now survive the lean times of a lengthening summer.

Polar bear scientists also say hunting quotas in western Hudson Bay, which covers the southern Kivalliq and northern Manitoba, are now too high and that hunting should be reduced until, in their view, the population recovers.

Stirling's western Hudson Bay work is strongly highlighted in the U.S. proposal and is cited frequently as back up for it. That's a sign that Nunavut, outclassed and outnumbered, has already lost the battle for public opinion.

Stirling's numbers are reproducing themselves throughout the world press like viruses. **The Centre for Biological Diversity** claims that the U.S. government has received 200,000 comments in support of listing the polar bear as threatened. And the Globe and Mail newspaper published an editorial condemning Nunavut's reaction to the U.S. proposal.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will receive submissions on the proposal for 90 days, then make a decision after 12 months.