

Will Polar Bears Be Named an Endangered Species?

By David Garrett

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If the polar bear is listed as an endangered species, the U.S. government must verify, by law, that nothing is being done to jeopardize the bears' existence. Yet that existence is jeopardized now, according to recent research. Polar bears depend on sea ice for their survival, and the disappearance of that ice is putting the white giants at risk.

» In a move that clearly questions the President's skeptical stance on global warming, the U.S. Department of the Interior has proposed that polar bears be named an endangered species. The bears are threatened by vanishing sea ice that nearly all experts view as part of the Earth's apparent fever from the effects of carbon emissions.

"We're making this proposal because the scientific review of this species by the Fish and Wildlife Service found that the populations may be threatened by receding sea ice," said Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne.

But it was not a statement he made readily. The Department's decision came only after a lawsuit by three pro-environment groups--Greenpeace, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and **Center for Biological Diversity**--forced it to start a review process that was due by law roughly a year ago.

"We actually filed that lawsuit the same day that the Kyoto Protocol entered into force without the participation of the U.S.," said **Kassie Siegel, director of climate air and energy program at the Center for Biological Diversity**.

Alarming Numbers

If the polar bear is listed as an endangered species after a 12-month review, the U.S. government must verify, by law, that nothing is being done to jeopardize the bears' existence.

Yet that existence is jeopardized now, according to a raft of recent research. Polar bears depend on sea ice for their survival, and the disappearance of that ice could make the white giants the first mammal to completely lose its habitat because of global warming.

In Western Hudson Bay alone, the polar bear population has shrunk from 1,200 bears in 1987 to fewer than 950 in 2004. In locations with a sea ice concentration higher than 15 percent, that ice--which is vital to polar bears' survival--has retreated by more than 115,000 square miles in the last year alone, according to the U.S. National Snow and Ice Data Center. That's roughly the size of Arizona.

The National Center for Atmospheric Research has predicted that arctic ice could recede by as much as 80 percent in the next 20 years, then disappear completely by 2040.

A Fight Ahead?

"The science is so clear and the impacts are so severe that not even the Bush administration can deny it anymore," **said Siegel**.

Whether or not the polar bear is named an endangered species remains to be seen, since the Bush administration has chosen not to follow proposals from the Department of the Interior in the past. But Siegel thinks the facts are on her side.

"We don't believe there's any lawful way they could deny protection to polar bears at this point," **said Siegel**. "If they do--if they inject political considerations and they do deny protections--we can challenge that in court."