

## Conservation group turns from polar bears to North Pacific right whales

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska: After winning more protection for polar bears, a conservation group is pressuring the U.S. government to keep the North Pacific right whale from going extinct.

The whales are the most endangered whale in the world.

The administration of U.S. President George W. Bush proposed Wednesday that polar bears be listed as "threatened" because of melting Arctic sea ice related to global warming. A threatened listing is one step lower than endangered, meaning the species is likely to face extinction in the future.

Also Wednesday, the conservation group got the Bush administration to propose that the North Pacific right whale get its own endangered listing, apart from right whales in the North Atlantic. The proposal must be finalized in a year.

Right whales have been listed as endangered since 1973, but the separate listing proposal is important because it will draw attention to the few right whales left in the Pacific, **said Brendan Cummings, ocean program director for the Arizona based Center for Biological Diversity.** **The center** was one of three groups that led the legal fight to get polar bears listed under the federal Endangered Species Act.

While scientists view the North Pacific and North Atlantic right whales as genetically distinct, they are listed as the same species. A 1991 recovery plan for right whales makes scant reference to whales in the North Pacific, instead focusing on the North Atlantic, where there are believed to be about 350, **Cummings said.**

Pacific right whales were hunted nearly to extinction in the 1840s, when 15,000 were killed in a single decade, **Cummings said.**

The whales were thought to be headed toward certain extinction until a surprising number turned up a couple of summers ago in the Bering Sea. Despite that, it is believed fewer than 100 exist off the Alaska coast, and a few hundred may still be left off the Russian coast.

The separate listing also will bring increased scrutiny to any proposals for oil and gas development in the area where the whales have repeatedly been spotted.

"We have the most endangered whale in the world and a proposal to open up its most important habitat to oil and gas development," **Cummings said**