



Environmental Groups Sue US Government Over Threat To Polar Bears

Sun, 18 Dec 2005 02:02:00 GMT
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As if criticism over its stance on the Kyoto Protocol wasn't enough, the United States' government is now facing a lawsuit by three environmental groups over the possibility of extinction of polar bears due to global warming. The suit was filed in the US District Court in San Francisco on Thursday.

The three groups, Center for Biological Diversity, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and Greenpeace, have sought protection for the bears under the Endangered Species Act and have demanded that the species be designated as 'threatened'.

"As global warming continues, more bears are going to die. This is very predictable, it's common sense. Their habitat is sea ice. They don't hunt from land, they don't hunt from water. They can't survive if their habitat disappears," said Kassie Siegel of the Center for Biological Diversity. "To ensure

these bears survive, we need to reduce the pollution that is melting their habitat. The Endangered Species Act is a safety net for plants and animals facing extinction. Listing will provide important protections for this majestic animal," she added.

The legal action comes amid various studies that have shown that the Arctic sea ice cover is shrinking rapidly and if emission of greenhouse gases was not arrested, in the next 100 years, the Arctic Ocean might be completely ice-free in summers. This means bad news for polar bears that live in the ice covers. This week, a report published by the US Minerals Management Service irked environmental groups with its details of the deaths of four polar bears in September 2004. In Alaska, the sea ice has retreated a record 160 miles of the northern coast. Due to this, polar bears that hunt seals on the ice were unable to swim back to

dry land because of the long distance.

"Global warming and rising temperatures in the Arctic jeopardize the polar bear's very existence. Polar bears cannot survive without sea ice. Polar bears could disappear in our lifetime if we don't take action," said Melanie Duchin, a spokesperson for Greenpeace.

Even though exact figures for polar bears are not available, their population has seen a decline in recent years. With 2005 being the hottest year of the century, concerns about the wild animal have increased. In the United States, polar bears are found in Alaska, with the Beaufort Sea having around 2,000 polar bears and the Bering-Chukchi stock between 2,000 and 5,000 of them.

According to a statement released by the Center for Biological Diversity, the population of polar bears in western Hudson Bay is already

dwindling because of
the breakage of sea ice
three weeks earlier
than in the past
decades. "The Hudson
Bay population of polar
bears has already
dropped approximately
14 per cent in 10
years, from 1,100 in
1995 to fewer than 950
in 2004," the
statement said.

"We need to take
action now to protect
these animals and
preserve their Arctic
habitat. We cannot
afford to ignore the
threat any longer," said
Andrew Wetzler of the
NRDC.