

## OPINION: Temporary fix of Arctic oil not worth steep price to polar bears

**By Kassie Siegel**

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POLITICAL HABITS DIE HARD in the Alaska governor's office, and Sean Parnell seems determined to carry on Sarah Palin's war against the polar bear.

Parnell's recent op-ed in the Mercury News ("Habitat designation won't help polar bears but will kill Alaska's jobs," Aug. 8) revealed the depths of his willingness to let this iconic Arctic species -- the planet's largest bear -- accelerate toward extinction in exchange for a few months of fuel for our oil-addicted economy.

It's not what most Americans want, what the Endangered Species Act requires or what the great white bear of the North deserves.

Contrary to Parnell's blithe assertions, the science is clear that polar bears are already in deep trouble and -- literally -- sinking fast.

A landmark study led by the U.S. Geological Survey in 2007 concluded that global warming, left unchecked, will likely eliminate all polar bears in Alaska in the next 40 years, with a significant chance of losing them in the next 20. The scientific evidence was so compelling that the Bush administration listed polar bears under the Endangered Species Act in 2008, citing global warming as the cause.

Polar bears are creatures of the Arctic sea ice and cannot survive

without it. It's where they hunt seals, mate and raise their young. As the planet warms, the sea ice has been melting far faster than scientists projected even a few years ago. The Polar Bear Specialist Group -- the most authoritative voice on the science of polar bears -- already classifies eight of the world's 19 populations as declining, including both in Alaska's Beaufort and Chukchi seas. These declines are all due to global warming, overhunting or a combination of both factors.

For the bears' survival, it is essential not only to address global warming but also to reduce other threats like oil spills. Oil is highly toxic to polar bears, and animals that are coated with oil will die. There is no way to clean up a spill in Arctic waters, and as the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico has tragically reminded us, where oil development occurs, oil spills inevitably follow.

Parnell wants to drill for oil in the Beaufort and the Chukchi seas off the north coast of Alaska -- straight into the heart of polar bear habitat. Predictably, he opposes designating these biologically productive areas as critical habitat for the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act. Critical habitat designation would give these areas special protection and require a higher level of environmental review before activities like oil development would be allowed.

But, ultimately, saving the polar bear will require cutting the greenhouse gases that are heating up its home. The Arctic has long acted as a sort of planetary air conditioner, because snow and ice reflect most of the sun's energy back into space. But as the summer sea ice disappears -- and more of the sun's heat is absorbed by open water and land -- it's as if we've unplugged that air conditioner. More heat is absorbed, accelerating warming and the thawing of the permafrost, which in turn releases more greenhouse gases. And the vicious cycle continues.

The melting Arctic creates climate feedbacks that could trigger catastrophic, runaway warming if we do not act. Leading scientists warn we must begin dramatic greenhouse pollution reductions now to reduce the risk of extreme climate disruption.

Given this imperative, Parnell's plan to sacrifice the polar bear to extract oil from the remote reaches of the Arctic simply can play no part in any rational energy future. It's time to move beyond oil to a saner, safer strategy, not just for the polar bear but for the rest of us as well.

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