



# U.S. Firms Up 'Critical Habitat' for Polar Bears

By FELICITY BARRINGER



THE INTERIOR DEPARTMENT DESIGNATED 187,157 square miles of Alaskan seas and lands as critical to the survival of the polar bear on Wednesday. More than 95 percent of it is offshore, including some areas that may have large undersea oil deposits.

Any development in an area that has been declared critical habitat for an endangered or threatened species must undergo extensive scrutiny by federal biologists and is often eventually ruled out.

Two populations of polar bears designated as threatened two years ago and thus protected under the Endangered Species Act roam widely in the areas designated by the Fish and Wildlife Service, part of the Interior Department.

A population of about 1,586 animals roam the ice and shores of the Beaufort Sea in the United States and Canada, said Rosa Meehan, the chief of the service's Marine Mammals Management Program in Alaska. That group "is a very well-studied" population, she said, and there are indications that it is declining as fewer cubs and young bears survive.

The statistics are not robust enough for biologists to declare that this group's population decline is certain, however.

A second population moves between the United States and Russia, occupying a wide area of the Chukchi Sea. Ms. Meehan said that a lack of data makes that population "far more enigmatic," although the best estimate is that it includes 2,000 to 3,000 bears. Most of those captured and collared "have been in very good condition," she said. "They are really fat."

The maps of critical habitat, which can be found at the bottom of this page posted by the Fish and Wildlife Service, include a great deal of sea ice because that is where the bears hunt and den during the winter. Coastal segments of northern Alaska are included as well: with the retreat of sea ice as a result of climate change, more bears are establishing dens on land near the sea's edge.

Among the den areas included in the new protections are coastal regions of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a sliver of land that was the subject of bitter

Congressional battles for almost two decades. Ted Stevens, the Alaskan lawmaker who died last summer, was bitterly disappointed by his defeat in a Senate vote on opening the refuge to drilling.

But in recent years, the oil industry's interest has moved from onshore oil fields like those at Prudhoe Bay to offshore areas. A United States Geological Survey report released a month ago cut by 90 percent the agency's estimates of onshore oil in Alaska's National Petroleum Reserve.

My colleague Clifford Krauss reported two weeks ago on Royal Dutch Shell's repeatedly delayed efforts to drill on its leases off Alaska.

It was close to overcoming the final regulatory hurdles when the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion killed 11 workers and unleashed a vast oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in the spring, he noted.

Now Shell is pushing for Interior Department approval of its lease plans, but is also putting its Beaufort Sea plans in the forefront, letting the Chukchi leases take a back seat.

A spokesman for Shell said later Wednesday that he would comment on the Interior Department announcement.

Three environmental groups — the Center for Biological Diversity, the Natural Resources Defense Council and Greenpeace — issued a joint news release praising the department's decision as "smart, especially in warding off ill-considered oil and gas development in America's most important polar bear habitat."



National Park Service/ A polar bear with her cubs in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.