

# The Gazette

## Global endangered species body launches review of Canadian polar bear trade

By Bruce Cheadle / The Canadian Press  
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OTTAWA - Environment Minister Leona Aglukkaq says she is confident that a new international review of Canada's trade in polar bear parts will reaffirm this country's conservation of the species.

The 180-country Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, or CITES, agreed last week in Mexico to conduct a lengthy study into the global trade of the iconic Arctic bears.

Known as a "significant trade review," the study will look at the practices of all five polar bear range states — Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Norway and Russia — although Canada is the only one that permits commercial trade in polar bears.

"Canada has in place a strong management regime for the polar bear that is based on science and aboriginal traditional knowledge," Aglukkaq said in an email response after being contacted about the review by The Canadian Press.

"We are confident that Canada's position will be reaffirmed through this review process."

According to participants in last week's meeting in Mexico, Canada did not object to the review, which it hopes will clear the air and confirm that the current bear trade is sustainable.

Ernie Cooper of the World Wildlife Fund Canada said the review was spurred in part by a dramatic



2010 spike in polar bear exports. Cooper is the Canadian representative on an international organization that tracks global traffic in threatened species.

"If there are any indications that a species is being traded at levels that look suspicious, then a significant trade review may be required to have a closer look," Cooper said in an interview.

However, Cooper says the 2010 data, upon closer examination, actually showed a lot of biological traffic in specimens such as blood and hair samples taken from tranquilized bears.

"A bit of blood taken from a live bear or a tooth taken from a bear that's been hunted or some hair samples isn't the same as a polar bear rug. So a spike of 10,000 biological specimens does not mean 10,000 bears were killed," he said.

"When you look at the data, the number of polar bear skins being traded had actually been reduced."

Environment Canada says 344 polar bear skins or bodies were exported in 2011, the last year for which numbers are available. Over the past decade, an average of 313 skins or bodies have been exported annually, about two per cent of some 16,000 Canadian polar bears the department estimated in 2011.

According to detailed export data posted by CITES, 175 polar bear skins were traded in 2011, a steady yearly decline from 574 in 2007. There were 129 trophy bears exported in 2011, down from 140 in 2007 but considerably more than the 50, 54 and 18 trophy bears in the intervening years.

Some 75 per cent of polar bear skins are now exported to China, according to Environment Canada. Experts say skin prices have skyrocketed due to Chinese demand.

"As Canada is the only country that allows commercial trade in this species, Canada's information will have a considerable influence on the trade assessment," Danny Kingsberry, a spokesman for Environment Canada, said in an email.

"The review is expected to determine that trade is sustainable, given Canada's effective management practices for the polar bear."

Animal welfare groups agree climate change is the real threat to polar bear survival, but some argue no commercial trade should be allowed given the larger environmental challenge.

"It's fairly unusual for a developed country to be put into '(significant) trade review,'" said Sarah Uhlemann, the Seattle-based staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

"It definitely suggests the world has some pretty significant concerns about the polar bear hunting that's going on in Canada right now."

Paul Todd of the International Fund for Animal Welfare attended the Veracruz meetings last week and said the review is "just a further signal that some concern about the trade in this species, predominantly from Canada, already exists."

He called the review "a good faith effort to use the CITES process and treaty to further shed some light on what is going on and how things can be strengthened."

Cooper, of the World Wildlife Fund, calls polar bear protection "a politically charged issue." But he said the significant review process itself does not change the game.

"This is not an alarm bell at all. It's not a criticism of Canada or a criticism of any country," he said. "It's simply routine business — but involving a species that tends to get a lot of attention."