

Saving the polar bears

Endangered Species Act might help these creatures survive global warming

By Kieran Suckling

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The biggest environmental story of 2006 was also the most surreal. At the height of the Christmas season, with lovable polar bears hawking soft drinks on television commercials across America, the Bush administration issued a proposal to list the snowy icon as a “threatened” species. The media frenzy was swift and global.

And puzzled. For so long, the White House denied the reality of the causes and impacts of global warming and suppressed and censored so many government reports on climate change, why was it now declaring that global warming is not only real, but killing polar bears?

Comparing the polar bear to Nixon's Cambodia and Kennedy's Bay of Pigs, Time magazine concluded: “Bush may never have encountered an eye he wasn't willing to at least consider poking. But even for him, the polar bear may have finally proven to be a fight too far.”

Actually, it's the Endangered Species Act that proved too tough. The law requires that all decisions be based solely on the best scientific information. Political and economic considerations are not allowed.

Since the science of global warming is clear, the White House had little choice but to propose threatened status. The proposal correctly notes that bears in western Hudson Bay have declined by 22 percent since 1987 and that mortality of cubs is rising while the weight of adult bears is declining.

State-of-the-art climate models predict that all Arctic summer sea ice could be gone by as early as 2040 – a level of melting that has not occurred in 800,000 years.

Unprecedented numbers of polar bear drownings and cannibalism are already being noted. As the sea ice fades away, it will only get worse.

The Endangered Species Act may be the last, best hope for the polar bear. While scores of species have gone extinct in the past few decades, 98 percent of those protected by the act have survived. And 93 percent of those, including the green sea turtle, gray wolf, bald eagle and southern sea otter, have improved or remained stable since coming under the act's protection.

The Endangered Species Act has been effective because it requires the government to identify and eliminate the threats to imperiled species. It requires the creation of “critical habitat” areas and recovery plans to guide federal conservation efforts. It requires the reform of inadequate government policies. It's a no-nonsense, boots-on-the-ground law.

Did I say no-nonsense? The polar bear listing proposal refuses to designate critical habitat areas, deeming the bear's habitat needs “undeterminable.” This is after pages and pages of analysis showing that polar bears need sea ice.

Worse, the proposal steadfastly refuses to identify the cause of global warming. The words “carbon,” “emissions” and “greenhouse gas” do not appear anywhere. It's as if the Arctic ice just decided to up and melt itself.

Secretary of Interior Dirk Kempthorne explains the omission by asserting that identifying and eliminating the causes of global warming are “beyond the scope of the Endangered Species Act.” Dale Hall, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, assured the oil and power industries that listing the polar bear as threatened won't have any impact on oil drilling in the Arctic or the permitting of new carbon-spewing power plants in the Lower 48. He told Greenwire, I “don't believe the ESA was intended to reach over into every agency in government.”

But that's exactly what the Endangered Species Act is intended to do. It requires all federal agencies to ensure the actions they conduct, fund or permit do not drive species extinct or harm their critical habitat. Its recovery plans are required to spell out concrete, measurable steps to eliminate threats, restore habitats and bring species back from the brink of extinction.

Bush may have been forced to admit the reality of global warming, but his polar bear “protection” proposal is actually a commitment to do nothing for bears or global warming. It's a death sentence, not a recovery strategy.

But Congress anticipated this kind of administrative foot-dragging when it created the Endangered Species Act 33 years ago. It wisely established science as the standard of management, not presidential whim. Whether Bush likes it or not, scientists will continue to study global warming, conservationists will continue to turn that science into conservation policy, and the Endangered Species Act will ensure polar bears have a chance to survive.

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