

Response Statement - Polar Bear

November 26, 2008

Common Name: Polar Bear

Scientific Name: *Ursus maritimus*

Status assessment by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC): Special Concern

How the Minister of the Environment intends to respond to the assessment: The Minister of the Environment intends to make a recommendation to Governor in Council that the Polar Bear be added to Schedule 1 as Special Concern. Before making the recommendation, the Minister of Environment will undertake consultations with the governments of Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board, the Gwich'in Renewable Resources Board, the Wildlife Management Advisory Council - Northwest Territories, the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, the Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Coordinating Committee, the Wildlife Management Advisory Council - North Slope and the Torngat Wildlife and Plants Co-Management Board, Aboriginal peoples, stakeholders, and the public on whether or not the Polar Bear should be added to the *List of Wildlife Species at Risk* (Schedule 1) under the *Species at Risk Act* as Special Concern. The Minister of the Environment will forward the COSEWIC assessment of the Polar Bear to the GIC upon completion of consultations.

Once a species has been assessed by COSEWIC, further steps must be undertaken before it is added to Schedule 1 of the *Species at Risk Act*. For more information on this process, please view [The Species Listing Process Under SARA](#).

Reason(s) for status designation provided by COSEWIC: The species is an apex predator adapted to hunting seals on the sea ice and is highly sensitive to overharvest. Although there are some genetic differences among bears from different parts of the Arctic, movement and genetic data support a single designatable unit in Canada. It is useful, however, to report trends by subpopulation because harvest rates, threats, and, hence, predicted population viability, vary substantially over the species' range. Some subpopulations are overharvested and current management mostly seeks the maximum sustainable harvest, which may cause declines if population monitoring is inadequate. Until 2006, some shared subpopulations were subject to harvest in Greenland that was not based on quotas. Population models project that 4 of 13 subpopulations (including approximately 28% of 15,500 polar bears in Canada) have a high risk of declining by 30% or more over the next 3 bear generations (36 years). Declines are partly attributed to climate change for Western Hudson Bay and Southern Beaufort Sea, but are mostly due to unsustainable harvest in Kane Basin and Baffin Bay. Seven subpopulations (about 43% of the total population) are projected to be stable or increasing. Trends currently cannot be projected for 2 subpopulations (29% of the total population). Bears in some subpopulations show declining body condition and changes in denning location linked to decreased availability of sea ice. For most subpopulations with repeated censuses, data suggest a slight increase in the last 10-25 years. All estimates of current population growth rates are based on currently available data and do not account for the possible effects of climate change. The species cannot persist without seasonal sea ice. Continuing decline in seasonal availability of sea ice makes it likely that a range contraction will occur in parts of the species range. Decreasing ice thickness in parts of the High Arctic may provide better habitat for the bears. Although there is uncertainty over the overall impact of climate change on the species' distribution and numbers, considerable concern exists over the future of this species in Canada.

Occurrence: Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Arctic Ocean

Competent Minister(s):

Minister of Environment

Minister responsible for the Parks Canada Agency

Province(s) and territory (territories) to be consulted:

Manitoba

Ontario

Quebec

Newfoundland and Labrador

Yukon

Northwest Territories

Nunavut

Applicable federal legislation: When the species is found within national parks of Canada or other lands administered by the Parks Canada Agency, it is protected or managed under the *Canada National Parks Act* or through measures or management tools available to the Parks Canada Agency under other legislation. Where it occurs in a National Wildlife Area this species is subject to the *Wildlife Area Regulations* under the *Canada Wildlife Act*, which prohibits activities that could be harmful to species and to their habitat, unless a permit is issued indicating the permitted activity.