



Conservation of Polar Bears in Canada



DID YOU KNOW?

Canada is home to approximately 16 000 of the estimated 20 000–25 000 polar bears in the global polar regions. It is no wonder that the polar bear, an icon of Canada's wildlife heritage, is of great cultural significance to the Canadian people. For the Inuit and many northern communities, polar bears are especially significant culturally, spiritually and economically. Canada has a unique conservation responsibility to protect these iconic creatures. This is one reason why Canada has increased investment in monitoring efforts in recent years. Canada's inventory schedule for polar bears is designed to ensure that there are up-to-date population estimates for all 13 subpopulations that occur in our country. While monitoring is challenging due to the remote and inhospitable environment of the Arctic, population estimates can help ensure that management and conservation actions are appropriate.

Polar bears and CITES

Appendix I listings are appropriate for species that are known to be traded internationally and when the trade has, or may have, a detrimental impact on the status of the species. At the current time, the polar bear does not meet the criteria for listing in CITES Appendix I. Approximately 2% of the Canadian polar bear population enters international trade (300 bears annually), and exports from Canada have not increased over the years. Polar bear trade does not come from a commercial harvest but from a subsistence harvest. Harvest quotas are based on principles of conservation and Aboriginal subsistence, and are not market driven; an Appendix I listing would have no conservation benefit.

Polar bears also do not meet the biological criteria to be listed in Appendix I. To be listed, a species must be "threatened with extinction," which is defined as a species that meets at least one of: a small wild population; the wild population has a restricted area of distribution; and/or, a marked decline that is either observed or projected. The current global population size is estimated at 20 000–25 000 polar bears. The polar bear does not have a small wild population, it does not have a restricted area of distribution and no marked decline has been observed.

International trade is not a threat to polar bears, and the species does not meet the biological criteria for an Appendix I listing at the current time.

Canada's Action on Polar Bears

Canada is home to two thirds of the global polar bear population and is committed to the conservation of this incredible species. In Canada, polar bears are protected through a collaborative approach that is shared with provinces, territories and regional wildlife management boards. This allows activities, investments and expertise to be coordinated across the country and ensures that each organization is meeting its responsibilities to conserve the species while supporting our international commitments. This collaborative approach has been successful in positioning Canada to meet its obligations as party to the *Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears* (1973) that was signed by Canada, Norway, Russia, Greenland and the United States.

In 2008, a committee of wildlife experts considering science and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge assessed polar bears as species of Special Concern. Extensive consultations with all Canadians, particularly in the North, took place over two years. The polar bear was listed as a species of Special Concern in November 2011 under the Species at Risk Act (SARA), which is strong domestic legislation to conserve and protect wildlife in Canada. A federal Management Plan is now under development in accordance with the Special Concern listing.



Ongoing assessments by experts, including the Polar Bear Technical Committee, have identified the most vulnerable populations of polar bears. As a result, a number of actions have been taken including signature of a Memorandum of Understanding with Greenland, targeted export restrictions and interjurisdictional coordination where appropriate.

Additional actions taken to protect polar bears include:

- Providing scientific advice and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge on harvest management consistent with the *Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears* (1973) to ensure that quotas allow for a sustainable harvest from polar bear populations.
- Regulating the import and export of live polar bears, polar bear hides and trophies through the Wild Animal and Plant Protection and Regulation of International and Interprovincial Trade Act (WAPPRIITA).
- Establishing protected areas for habitat important to polar bears through our national parks, national and marine wildlife areas, and provincial and territorial parks.
- Developing a National Polar Bear Conservation Strategy (completed August 2011) and involvement in the development of a Circumpolar Action Plan with the other Range States (in progress).
 - The Circumpolar Action Plan will be informed by science and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge and will focus on opportunities for collaboration across the range of the polar bear. It is anticipated that the plan will be finalized by the 2015 Range States Meeting of the Parties.

International Action

Canada is working with its international partners, including non-governmental organizations, to coordinate our efforts in polar bear conservation. Our international actions include:

- Meeting international obligations under:
 - 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears
 - Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)
- Collaborating with the other Polar Bear Range States on conservation actions
- Signing bilateral agreements on the management of polar bears:
 - US–Canada Memorandum of Understanding
 - Greenland–Canada Memorandum of Understanding
- Working with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
 - Environment Canada scientists are members of the IUCN’s Polar Bear Specialist Group, who compile scientific information and give independent advice to decision-makers and management authorities.

Research

Environment Canada is combining science, experience and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge to form the basis for our research. The inclusion of Traditional Knowledge helps to provide information on polar bear abundances, movements and behaviours, and provides valuable long-term perspective on changes in the population. This approach is unique, as Canada is the only country that considers Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge in the management and conservation of polar bears.

Cooperative research is often undertaken where the project is of interest to several jurisdictions, including the United States (Alaska), Greenland and Norway. Some research projects conducted by university researchers are coordinated with government scientists.

Other projects are supported by funds from wildlife management boards established by the land claims process, by independent foundations, and through grants to graduate students who are co-supervised by government and university researchers.

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The Polar Bear Range States

The five parties to the 1973 Agreement recognize that polar bears are important for people in northern communities, the Range States and the world. The nature and pace of change in the Arctic requires action locally, nationally and internationally. The five Range State countries will continue to work collaboratively on both new and ongoing conservation initiatives.

Climate change

- Canada is taking action on all fronts—domestic, continental and international—to address the impacts of climate change.
- We stand firm on our commitment to reduce our greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 17% from 2005 levels, by 2020. To move towards this goal, we have developed a sector-by-sector regulatory plan to systematically address all major sources of emissions.
- Internationally, the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action has set out a negotiating mandate for all countries to develop a single, new, international treaty to include all major emitters, to be implemented by 2020. Canada will continue to engage actively with international partners over the next several years to successfully conclude these negotiations.
- Climate change continues to have a negative impact on polar bears in some portions of their range and remains the most important threat to their long-term range-wide security.
- Conservation plans for polar bears must consider highly variable immediate and ongoing effects as well as predictable ultimate effects of the global warming challenge.



For more information
on polar bears, please visit:

www.ec.gc.ca/nature/default.asp?lang=En&=A997D1CC-1