

Final Report



Meeting of the parties
to the 1973 Agreement
on the Conservation of
Polar Bears

17 - 19 March 2009, Tromsø, Norway

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Introduction

Background for the meeting

The Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears was concluded in Oslo, Norway, on 15 November 1973, and today has Canada, Greenland, Norway, Russia and the United States of America as parties.

At a polar bear range states meeting in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, USA, 26 – 28 June 2007, the range states, in accordance with the provisions of the Agreement, including Articles VIII and IX, agreed that meetings under the Agreement should be held on a biennial schedule or otherwise as agreed to by the Parties.

The range states also agreed in Shepherdstown that the first such meeting should be held in 2009, and in 2008 the parties welcomed the offer of Norway to host such a meeting.

A formal invitation to the meeting was sent to the other parties from the Norwegian Ministry of the environment on 17 November 2008.

Against this background, the five parties met in Tromsø, Norway, 17 – 19 March 2009, with an objective to provide an update on the conservation status for the polar bears, review implementation of the Agreement, identify useful polar bear conservation strategies and to discuss mechanisms for enhanced implementation of the Agreement.

Further information on the meeting

A home page was established for the meeting, and can be found at www.polarbearmeeting.org. The home page includes documentation related to the meeting, references to the 1973 and 1981 meetings of the parties, and the country and scientific reports presented at the meeting.

The meeting was organized by the Norwegian Directorate for nature management (DN) and the Norwegian Polar Institute (NP) in co-operation. Contact details are as follows:

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Further information on the meeting can be found on this home page and/or by contacting the organizers of the meeting.

1 Opening of the meeting

Finn Katerås, on behalf of the Norwegian Directorate for Nature Management and the Norwegian Polar Institute as organizers of the conference, welcomed delegates to the conference, referring to the 2007 Shepherdstown meeting, at which the Range States had agreed to meetings under the Agreement on a biennial basis, the next of these being the current one in Tromsø 2009.

1.1 Welcome address by the Mayor of Tromsø

The Mayor of Tromsø, Arild Hausberg pointed out that Tromsø is the centre of the green north, and is also a hub for science, with more than 500 researchers occupied with polar research. In the past, the town was a centre for expeditions hunting polar bears. Today Tromsø remains the polar bear capital of Norway, but now in a scientific context.

1.2 Address to the meeting by the Norwegian Minister of the environment and international development

The Norwegian Minister of the Environment and International Development, Erik Solheim, pointed out that Tromsø is a centre for polar research in Norway, and that a new dimension is now added – a national centre for ice, climate and ecosystems (ICE). The Minister sees that the polar bear is not just another threatened species. It is a proud symbol of the Arctic, increasingly associated with the vulnerability of all Arctic life. Polar bears are top predators and good indicator of the health of the Arctic ecosystem. To save polar bears we must save its habitat - the ice-covered Arctic sea. This is important for the survival of all organisms that are dependent on the Arctic sea ice - including Man. To succeed in conserving this important ecosystem, we must stop global warming.

The Minister referred to his visit to Antarctica two weeks earlier with other environmental ministers. The arrangement included a stopover in Cape Town. The Cape Peninsula contains more species than the whole of Europe due to stability of the regional climate over the past two million years which has allowed species to become highly specialized. The same principle applies to the polar bear which will react to fluctuations of a just a couple of degrees of climate change.

The Minister expressed his thanks to those who formulated the Polar Bear Agreement in 1973, at a time when hunting was the main threat to polar bears. The Agreement has been a success in protecting the species; hunting is substantively reduced as a threat to the species. Today, the main threats are climate change and, to a lesser degree, long range transport of pollution.

The Minister noted that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has upgraded the status of polar bears to “vulnerable” on their Global “red-list” of Threatened Species. A population reduction of approximately 30 % is expected within three generations if the decrease in sea-ice continues as projected.

The Minister has noted that scientists are warning that the reduction of Arctic sea ice could soon reach a “tipping point” and enter a cycle of warming and melting from which it is not likely to recover. This could become a self-generating and self-amplifying process, with the absorption of energy by the ocean amplifying the process of sea ice melting. Rapid reductions in sea ice may also trigger other mechanisms, such as the release of methane from the Arctic tundra and seafloor. The Minister asked for a clear message to Copenhagen on the need to protect the eco-system as a whole, not just in the