

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

Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada, 24 -26 October 2011

OUTCOME OF MEETING

Polar bear are important for people in northern communities, 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 have, or are, developing strategies to guide domestic efforts, including both new and on-going initiatives. Complementing this work, a Range States plan is being developed. It will be informed by science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge and will focus on opportunities for collaboration across the range of the polar bear. It is anticipated that a draft will be discussed at the next Range States meeting with formal approval to follow.

Introduction

The Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears was concluded in Oslo, Norway, on November 15th 1973. The Range States comprises Canada, Greenland, Norway, Russia and the United States of America.

As agreed upon at previous meetings (USA 2007, Norway 2009) the Range States, in accordance with the provisions of the Agreement, including Articles VIII and IX, decided that meetings under the Agreement should be held on a biennial schedule or otherwise as agreed to by the Parties.

As agreed at the 2009 meeting, the Range States worked inter-sessionally to begin development of a range-wide action plan. This circumpolar action plan is to be based on national plans developed by the Range States.

Against this background, and building on the outcomes of the Tromsø (Norway) meeting, the five Range States met in Iqaluit, Nunavut (Canada) from 24-26 October 2011, with an objective to provide an update on the conservation measures for polar bear, review progress on the development of national action plans, and prepare a workplan for the completion of the range-wide action plan. Further to the 2009 invitation to the PBSG to provide technical and scientific advice to the Range States, the role of the PBSG was formalized at the 2011 meeting. The PBSG accepted their role as the science advisory body to the Range States, will participate fully in meetings, and will contribute to the development of the range-wide plan.

Summary of national updates

Since the 2009 meeting, the Range States have been working to develop national action plans. Russia's plan was completed in 2010, and Canada's plan is in the final stages of approval. All Parties have made significant progress on the development of their plans and this work is acknowledged. Parties are encouraged to finalize their plans, thereby upholding obligations stemming from the 2009 meeting.

United States

The United States is committed to working with partners in the Range States. We see International partnerships as key to conservation of shared polar bear populations – polar bears do not recognize international boundaries. The United States is also committed to domestic partnerships as demonstrated by our process developing our Polar Bear Conservation/Recovery Plan. While we recognize that increasing greenhouse gas emissions are the primary threat, our focus is on minimizing impacts to polar bears where we can – notably bear/human interactions.

The United States views the effort of the Range States to develop an Arctic-wide Action Plan as directly related to our ESA listing– we recognized that polar bears will be adversely affected by climate change. As we identified the primary threats to polar bears range-wide, likewise we need to also manage on a range-wide basis. The United States stands ready to commit to helping draft the plan not only to meet our statutory obligations, but also because we are committed to polar bear conservation.

At our last meeting in Tromso, Norway, the Range States recognized that bear/human interactions will increase due to expanding human populations, industrial development and tourism. In addition, a continued increase in the number of nutritionally stressed bears on land due to retreating sea ice will result in more bear/human interactions; the parties agreed on the need to develop comprehensive strategies to manage such conflicts. A draft database, populated with data from both the U.S. and Norway is ready for review and comment.

The United States has made significant progress toward polar bear conservation since we last met in Tromso, working at all levels of government to collaboratively manage polar bears. We designated “Critical Habitat” for polar bears in the United States under our Endangered Species Act. We maintained our “Incidental Take Regulations” that provide specific guidance to the oil and gas industry and provided Deterrence Regulations for all activities in the range of polar bears. We manage harvest in the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population under the Agreement between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on the Conservation and Management of the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population and in the Southern Beaufort Sea through the Inuvialuit-Inupiat Polar Bear Management Agreement for the Southern Beaufort Sea. We conduct “polar bear patrols” in coastal communities. We continue a robust research program that spans demographics, habitat use and overall ecology of polar bears, and aims to understand mechanisms of polar bear response to a rapidly changing sea ice environment. We continue to conduct extensive outreach through workshops, community visits, and publications.

Russia

The Strategy for Polar Bear Conservation in the Russian Federation was approved by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of the Russian Federation, Decree No. 26-r of 5th July 2010. Priority measures included in the Strategy include development of international cooperation, improvement of the legal framework, improvement of the network of specially protected natural areas, improvement of the effectiveness of polar bear conservation outside specially protected natural areas, scientific research, monitoring of polar bear populations, prevention and resolution of human-bear conflicts, awareness raising and education. The Action Plan based on the Strategy has been developed and is a recommendation document.

The Research program on polar bear in the Russian Arctic of the Russian Academy of Sciences has been developed and implemented since 2010. It includes air surveys, ship surveys, satellite telemetry, means of molecular genetics. It performs research on temporal and spatial distribution of polar bears, annual and seasonal movement, identification of natural and anthropogenic factors that affect survival and reproduction, sea ice movement.

The 3rd meeting of the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission was held from 27-29 July 2011 in Moscow, Russia. The main questions that were discussed: multi-year quota system, joint monitoring, research and management plans. Different projects were realized on ensuring the full participation of Native peoples in the conservation of the Alaska-Chukotka population and recognition the continued importance of Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

Norway

Norway informed about efforts related to management, monitoring and research of the polar bear for the Norwegian part of the Barents Sea subpopulation. A comprehensive legal and policy framework is in place for management on Svalbard and in the Barents Sea, including high environmental policy objectives for Svalbard, strict regulations in the Svalbard Environment Act, and protected areas as a key tool for protection of polar bear habitat. Recent development includes work on management plans for protected areas important for polar bear denning and agreement with Russia in 2010 on delineation of the border between Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea. Norway provided an update on their monitoring and research priorities and activities, and highlighted the continuous need for monitoring changes in sea ice conditions and consequences for polar bears and for considering the need for management responses. Lastly, Norway informed about key international efforts related to polar bear conservation, including bilateral co-operation with Russia and links to key international agreements inter alia on climate change and pollution.

Greenland

Management - There are 5 polar bear populations within Greenlandic jurisdiction (East Greenland, Davis Strait, Baffin Bay, Kane Basin, Arctic Basin), with four populations harvested by occupational hunters.

In Greenland, polar bear protection and hunting is regulated by the executive order from 2005, whereby a multi-year quota system was introduced in 2006. The last quota period is 2010-2012 and a new multi-year quota will be established in late-2012 for the following period. After the introduction of quotas, the harvest rates have stabilized. The goal is to gain sustainable quotas for all harvested populations. Greenland stated that it is very important that there are good working relations between scientists, management regime and hunters in managing and monitoring of polar bears. Based on Non-Detriment Finding (NDF), Greenland implemented a voluntary export ban on all polar bear products in 2008. Greenland also reported on increased human/polar bear interactions the last 2-3 years, and that they are working on further improvements of the established guidelines.

Research - In collaboration with Canada/Nunavut, Greenland has started a biopsy darting sampling programme of the Kane Basin and Baffin Bay subpopulations. From 2011 and forward, Greenland has also implemented a research programme for polar bear population in East Greenland. Greenland also continues to work on improvement on the established monitoring programme, including a real-time catch reporting system.

Important next steps - Greenland informed also that monitoring is being improved to allow immediate management responses to occurring changes, including biopsy sampling from all hunts in order to ensure continued sustainable quotas. Greenland is also focusing its activities to implement the bilateral agreement with Canada/Nunavut on shared stocks in Kane Basin and Baffin Bay. Greenland informed that further focus will be given to the development of National Action Plan in coordination with the Circumpolar Action Plan.

Canada

Canada noted that it has a strong management system with federal provincial and territorial engagement. It includes comprehensive monitoring systems, responsive harvest management systems, a respected enforcement regime, export controls and world class human-polar bear conflict management systems. Recent efforts focused on ensuring that the required inter-jurisdictional structures are implemented. A National Polar Bear Conservation Strategy was developed and is now ready for signature by federal, provincial and territorial ministers as well as concerned Wildlife Management Boards.

Bilateral work

Canada-Nunavut-Greenland

In 2009, Greenland, Canada and Nunavut signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the conservation of the Baffin Bay and Kane Basin subpopulations. The Commission set up under the agreement has met twice to date (Ottawa 2010, Ilulissat 2010), and has approved a monitoring plan that is currently being implemented. Once data are available, the Commission will be in a position to formulate advice for harvest management for these two subpopulations.

Canada-United States

The Secretary of the Department of the Interior and the Minister of Environment, Canada, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2008. This MOU promotes bilateral efforts to conserve and manage the polar bear population shared between the two countries. This MOU builds upon existing agreements and ongoing collaborations and is not intended to supersede previous and significant contributions by Inupiat and Inuvialuit people, FWS, Canadian Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and Environment Canada, for the conservation and management of polar bears. The two countries recognize the importance of the Inuvialuit-Inupiat Polar Bear Management Agreement for the Southern Beaufort Sea. The Commissioners of this Agreement recently met and, in response to newly available scientific information, reduced the harvest quota.

Russia-US

The shared polar bear population in the Chukchi and Bering Seas is managed under the Agreement between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on the Conservation and Management of the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population. The Agreement provides a structure for the two countries to coordinate efforts to conserve this population and its habitat and manage subsistence harvest at sustainable levels. The U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission has met twice since 2009 to share scientific and management information, establish take limits, and coordinate management efforts.

Polar Bear-Human Information Management System (PBHMIS)

The US and Norway presented a polar bear-human interaction system that allows for entry and analysis of human-polar bear conflict data to refine management actions necessary to inform future anticipated increases in human-polar bear conflicts. The Range States agreed to further development and implementation of the system to be explored through a group comprised of members approved by each Range State.

PBSG report

As noted in the 2007 and 2009 reports of the Range States Meetings, climate change continues to have a negative impact on polar bears in portions of their range and remains the most important threat to their long-term range-wide security. The PBSG noted that changes in sea ice are not expected to affect polar bears in all portions of their range at the same time, or in the same ways, and that polar bears in some portions of their range may see transient but significant benefit from a milder climate. Conservation plans for polar bears must consider highly variable transient effects as well as predictable ultimate effects of the global warming challenge.

Range-wide action plan development process

The Range States range-wide action plan will supplement the national action plans and will focus on areas that require, or will benefit from, international coordination and collaboration. It will fully leverage and respect the capacities, mandate and responsibility of national governments. The action plan will include principles, vision and goals,

information about the species, threats to polar bears, objectives, management efforts and cooperation, range-wide conservation actions, monitoring, research, and implementation of considerations.

This plan will:

- need to include an adaptive management approach given the significant change occurring in the Arctic (e.g. changes to sea ice coverage, increased development);
- ensure that according to the principle of subsidiarity: actions will be taken at the appropriate level;
- strive to balance conservation of polar bear with the needs of communities living within the range of the species;
- consider the best available science and increased consideration of Traditional Ecological Knowledge;
- ensure the engagement of Indigenous peoples domestically as well as internationally;
- use the precautionary principle.

A number of priority areas for range-wide collaboration were identified. These include:

- Prevention and management of human-bear conflicts;
- Development of strategies to minimize impacts of human activities (e.g. mining, shipping, oil and gas activities, tourism);
- Engage the general public and communities in outreach activities that facilitate communication;
- Development of best management practices for inter alia harvest management;
- Consideration of approaches to facilitate a range-wide overview of status and trends via appropriate monitoring;
- Identification of priority areas of research.

Building on the effective collaboration established after the 2009 meeting of the Range States, individually or collaboratively, the parties will take on the drafting of the various components of the Action Plan with the aim of having a first draft ready for review at the next Range States meeting.

Closing:

Host, venue and dates for the next Range State meetings will be identified as soon as possible. Range States thanked Norway for co-leading inter-sessional work with Canada. Canada commits to work with the upcoming meeting host to continue to co-lead work leading up to the next meeting. The Range States thank Canada and Government of Nunavut for hosting the meeting.

*** This outcome document is not legally binding and creates no legally binding obligations for the parties to the 1973 Agreement for the Conservation of polar bears.

Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada
26 October 2011.