

Polar Bear Range States Meeting Summary
26-28 June, 2007
Shepherdstown, West Virginia, U.S.A.

Purpose of the Meeting

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service convened a meeting of competent polar bear authorities in the polar bear Range States to provide an international forum to exchange information on polar bear research and management programs, and on the status of polar bear populations, and to consider recommendations for additional national or collective measures that the Range States may take to conserve the species.

Impetus for the Meeting

Recognizing the growing concern over polar bear conservation in light of a number of factors including climate change, contaminants in the Arctic, and other issues, there exists a desire among the Range States to use established venues such as the 1973 Agreement to pursue multilateral approaches for information exchange and collaboration on polar bear conservation challenges.

Relationship of the 1973 Agreement to the IUCN Polar Bear Specialist Group

The World Conservation Union (IUCN), through its Species Survival Commission (SSC) Specialist Groups, provides a science-based network of experts throughout the world to provide scientific advice to government agencies and others to support the implementation of multilateral environmental agreements. Since 1968, the Polar Bear Specialist Group (PBSG) has provided technical support and scientific advice on polar bear conservation to the government agencies responsible for polar bear management in the Arctic Region. This group was formed prior to the 1973 Agreement.

The 1973 Agreement is a multilateral environmental agreement among polar bear Range States to facilitate cooperative research and management for polar bears among their competent authorities. While not formally mandated, it is recognized that the technical support and scientific advice on polar bear conservation provided by the PBSG to the Range States supports the 1973 Agreement and is a vital part of the decision making process that the competent authorities utilize in making their management decisions concerning polar bear conservation.

Meeting Outcomes

This meeting provided a vehicle to share the current state of information concerning the status and threats to polar bear populations among the Range States and outlined proposed management objectives and priorities of the competent authorities. The Range States agreed that impacts of climate change and the continued and increasing loss of sea

ice -- the key habitat for both polar bears and their main prey species -- constitutes the most significant among several threats to polar bear conservation.

The Range States identified opportunities for collaboration in the management of specific shared populations relative to status surveys, harvest quotas, and management plans. The Range States agreed to an enhanced coordination of management activities for shared populations.

The Range States recognize the important contributions that the PBSG has made with respect to the Contracting Parties for their implementation of the 1973 Agreement. This expert group has reviewed and identified research and monitoring needs that are critical to worldwide polar bear conservation, and this has provided important advice for consideration by each of the Range States.

The Range States agreed that they must work together collaboratively and recognize that informed dialogue is required in order to explore opportunities to address these needs. It is noted that several of the Range States are actively collaborating on research in areas of shared populations and on specific research priorities including contaminants and climate warming impacts on polar bears and sea ice.

The Range States agreed that western science and systematically-collected traditional ecological knowledge on population ecology, demographics, and habitats are critical for the informed management of sustainable polar bear populations. At present, and often for practical reasons, monitoring of the various subpopulations, including for conservation purposes, occurs at different frequencies and methodologies resulting in data incompatibility and incomplete spatial and temporal polar bear metrics across the vast Arctic ecosystem. The high cost of monitoring in Arctic ecosystems is most often the major impediment to obtaining the information that is required. These limitations need to be overcome collaboratively in the face of changing habitats in order to achieve conservation goals for polar bears in the face of climate warming, industrial development and other threats.

The Range States agreed that their most urgent research and monitoring priority in the near term is to secure appropriations and sufficient data on the status and trends of polar bear populations in order to secure sound management, not least where data are insufficient. It is the responsibility of the Range States to establish and maintain necessary programs to facilitate this. The Range States further agreed that the meeting Chair, with the Heads of Delegations of the competent authorities, will facilitate a dialogue with the PBSG to develop a work request for the PBSG to define the minimum information needs and design standards for the ongoing monitoring and reporting of the status of each subpopulation and habitats. When developing the minimum monitoring requirements, both conventional scientific monitoring and systematically collected user observations and traditional ecological knowledge should be considered. This design would be presented by the PBSG to each of the Range States as soon as practicable.

The Range States clarified the import/export processes currently in use. The Range States noted that the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) is an important aspect of polar bear management and that all range countries have adequate statutory authority for CITES. Current processes are working well through bilateral dialogue. The Range States recommend that range countries share best practices, and acknowledged the significant progress by Greenland in its implementation of CITES.

The Range States clarified the status of sport hunting within the context of Articles III and IV of the 1973 Agreement. The Range States noted that currently Canada allows sport hunting as a part of their subsistence harvest. Greenland is considering sport hunting within its polar bear management framework. Norway, Russia and the United States do not allow sport hunting and do not anticipate allowing sport hunting in the foreseeable future. The Range States agreed that, where it is available, properly managed sport hunting programs do not pose a threat to polar bear conservation and may provide an incentive for polar bear conservation through increased economic benefits.

The Range States noted the tradition of indigenous peoples¹ for subsistence harvest, and acknowledged the inherent right of Canadian indigenous peoples for subsistence harvest of polar bears, and the need to provide that subsistence harvest, particularly of shared populations, is based on sustainable management programs. The Range States agreed that continued coordination among Range States as part of a scientifically based framework for shared population management is critical.

The Range States agreed to a number of action items relative to the issue of bear-human interactions. For oil and gas development, the Range States agreed that this is an emerging issue and that there is a need for appropriate policies, regulations, and management measures to minimize impacts on polar bears. There is also a need for monitoring programs and a greater understanding of the impacts on polar bear populations. The forthcoming Arctic Council oil and gas assessment may also provide important information in this regard. For village safety issues, the Range States agreed that there are increasing incidences of polar bear-human interactions, and there are a number of positive examples of programs to reduce this conflict. The Range States agreed to an exchange of information on best practices to minimize conflicts.

The Range States agreed that shipping and large vessel traffic is an emerging issue. The Range States noted that the Arctic Council is undertaking an Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment and deferred further consideration until that assessment is complete. For tourism, the Range States agreed that impacts to polar bear conservation are a growing concern, and that there is a need for appropriate policies, regulations, and management measures to minimize impacts on polar bears. The Range States agreed that voluntary best practices and a code of conduct for tourist activities should be considered.

¹ The United States notes that the use of the term “peoples” in this report shall not be construed as having any implications as regard the rights which may attach to the term under international law.

For habitat protection measures, the Range States reinforced the importance of Article II of the 1973 Agreement relative to the adequate protection of ecosystems of which polar bears are a part. Further, the Range States welcomed the efforts already undertaken on habitat protection and encouraged continued bilateral cooperation on habitat protection relative to shared populations, as well as land-use planning for conservation purposes. The Range States further agreed to promote land-use planning to conserve critical coastal, marine, and terrestrial areas in need of protection, share experiences on the management of key areas such as the marginal ice zone, and identify appropriate polar bear management initiatives in response to changing sea ice conditions.

The Range States recommended that a process be developed within the existing framework of the 1973 Agreement to assess the effectiveness of the agreement to achieve its core objectives.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that the Contracting Parties to the 1973 Agreement would benefit from an assessment of its effectiveness in achieving its core objectives. The Range States used this meeting as a starting point for renewed efforts, and explored possible options and ways forward. They also noted that the last meeting of the Contracting Parties occurred in 1981.

In accordance with the provisions of the 1973 Agreement, including Articles VIII and IX, the Range States agreed that meetings under the Agreement should be held on a biennial schedule or otherwise as agreed to by the Parties. It was agreed that the first such meeting should be held in 2009. The Range States recognized the need for a coordinated circumpolar action plan for the conservation of circumpolar polar bear populations and agreed that the agenda for the next biennial meeting would be developed by a working group in reflecting items identified by this meeting.

The Range States agreed to establish a working group to serve as an interim structure to develop a governance structure for the 1973 Agreement. This working group will be comprised of the Heads of Delegation to this meeting (or their designees) to serve as the representatives of the Range States. The working group will meet periodically via teleconference or in person to assess progress of action items agreed at the 2007 meeting and to consider emerging issues to facilitate the improved implementation of the 1973 Agreement.