

6 June 2010

IUCN POLAR BEAR SPECIALIST GROUP RESPONSE TO NUNAVUT LISTING DECISION

The IUCN/SSC Polar Bear Specialist Group (PBSG) is concerned about the Government of Nunavut's recent decision not to support the proposed listing of polar bears as a Species of Special Concern under Canada's *Species At Risk Act*. In justifying this position, the Government of Nunavut stated that Inuit knowledge and science corroborate that polar bears in Nunavut are "thriving" and "will adapt to changing and severe climatic conditions". The PBSG believes this position is contrary to all available evidence, and will not lead to best possible conservation of the species.

As an IUCN/SSC member specialist group comprised of up to 25 technical experts from the 5 polar bear range states, the PBSG is the single most authoritative source of information on the world's polar bears. Its official charge is to produce and compile scientific knowledge about the world's polar bears. The PBSG provides *independent* scientific advice to decision-makers and management authorities and is the official scientific advisory group to the parties of the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears.

The PBSG has reviewed the science surrounding polar bears and climate warming. Although the PBSG recognizes that climate change and the subsequent impacts on polar bears will occur at different rates and times throughout the circumpolar Arctic, it has concluded that unabated global warming will ultimately threaten polar bears everywhere. The loss of sea ice habitat (upon which polar bears depend for feeding, traveling, and mating) associated with climate warming poses a significant and ongoing threat to the conservation of the species. There is no scientific evidence to support the suggestion that polar bears will adapt to the pace and scale of current and projected habitat loss.

The polar bear is currently listed as "*Vulnerable*" on the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species (<http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/22823/0>) and was recently listed by the United States as "*Threatened throughout its range*" under the US Endangered Species Act. These listing decisions were based on extensive reviews of the scientific evidence suggesting a significant loss of sea ice habitat projected or observed over a period of 3 generations (up to 45 years). Co-managed subpopulations in Davis Strait, Southern Hudson Bay, and Western Hudson Bay, which are shared by Nunavut, have been designated as "*Vulnerable*" or "*Threatened*" under provincial legislation in Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, and Manitoba. Furthermore, Greenland shares three polar bear populations with Nunavut: Kane Basin, Baffin Bay and Davis Strait. In 2007 Greenland designated these populations as "*Vulnerable*" on its Redlist. These designations were underpinned by observed and projected impacts of climate warming.

At their March 2009 meeting in Tromsø, Norway, the 5 polar bear range states expressed deep concern over the accelerating rate and extent of changes in the Arctic induced by climate warming. They unanimously agreed that impacts of climate change and the continued and increasing loss and fragmentation of sea ice, the key habitat for both polar bears and their main prey, constituted the most important threat to polar bear conservation. In accordance with that finding, the PBSG passed a resolution in July 2009

recognizing that Environment Canada's proposal to formally list polar bears as a species of Special Concern was based on a report that failed to account for the projected effects of global warming and was therefore excessively optimistic in its conservation outlook relative to similar reports used to inform the listing decisions of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS 2008) and the IUCN (Schliebe et al. 2008). In 2009 the PBSG also resolved that "Polar bear range state governments and designated authorities agree to consider the current and likely future impacts of global warming in all management and planning affecting polar bears and their key habitats."

In concert with the above referenced findings and resolutions, the PBSG encourages Nunavut to re-examine its position and adhere to the international Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears (1973) which states that "Each contracting Party shall... manage polar bear populations in accordance with sound conservation practices based on the best available scientific data" (Article II). We similarly urge the Canadian Government, through its *Species At Risk Act*, to use the best available science in developing a responsible conservation strategy for most of the world's polar bears.

Schliebe, S., Wiig, Ø., Derocher, A. and Lunn, N. 2008. *Ursus maritimus*. In: IUCN 2010. IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2010.1. <www.iucnredlist.org>. Downloaded on 02 June 2010.

USFWS. 2008. Endangered and threatened wildlife and plants; determination of Threatened Status for the polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*) throughout its range; final rule. *Federal Register* **73**:28211-28303.