



# Species Survival Network

CITES COP15 2010 • Doha, Qatar



## Polar Bear *Ursus maritimus*

**CoP15 Prop. 3** (United States of America) Transfer from Appendix II to Appendix I in accordance with Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP14), Annex 1, paragraph C) ii): A marked decline in the population size in the wild, which has been inferred or projected on the basis of a decrease in area of habitat and a decrease in quality of habitat.

**SSN VIEW: SUPPORT Adoption of Proposal**

**CRITERIA FOR LISTING SPECIES ON APPENDIX I INCLUDE POPULATION DECLINE CAUSED PRIMARILY BY HABITAT LOSS.**

Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP14) states that species qualify for listing on CITES Appendix I if they “are or may be affected by trade” and if they show a “marked decline in the population size in the wild, which has been inferred or projected on the basis of a decrease in area of habitat and a decrease in quality of habitat”. The polar bear meets these criteria for listing on Appendix I.

**POLAR BEARS ARE AFFECTED BY TRADE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CITES.**

Polar bear specimens are traded internationally for commercial (e.g. polar bear skin rugs) and non-commercial (e.g. trophies) purposes; exports of polar bear specimens for both purposes have increased since the early 1990s. In 2007, international commercial trade included 554 skins, one of the largest numbers exported in any year on record, plus 139 hunting trophies, the largest number exported in any year on record (UNEP-WCMC CITES Trade Database). The mean annual export from Canada alone between 2004 and 2008 was approximately 300 bears (Environment Canada 2009). According to trade data from the UNEP-WCMC CITES Trade Database, from 1992 through 2006 a total of 31,294 polar bear specimens and products (bodies, trophies, live animals, parts, pieces, or derivatives), an average of 2,086 annually, were exported/re-exported. Sixty-nine percent of those exported were derived from animals taken from the wild; 51% were exported from Canada, 31% from Greenland, 8% from Norway, 7% from the United States, and 3% from Russia. These items were imported by 73 different countries over the 15-year time-span, including: Denmark (29%), the United States (19%), Japan (13%), Canada (11%), Norway (10%), Germany (4%), the United Kingdom (2%), Spain (1%), France (1%), Greenland (1%), Mexico (1%), and Sweden (1%). Between 1992 and 2006, skins accounted for the majority of items exported for commercial purposes. An average of 216 skins was exported annually during this period, 87% from Canada and 13% from Greenland. Japan (59%), Denmark (15%), and Norway (12%) were the main importers.

In addition to the levels of recorded legal trade indicated by CITES data, other forms of take and international trade are not recorded, or in some areas even regulated. Because the polar bear is listed in Appendix II, items that qualify as personal and household effects (i.e. handicrafts purchased by tourists) do not require CITES export permits from those Parties that recognize the CITES personal effects exemption. Three (Norway, U.S., and Russia) of the five range States currently prohibit the killing of polar bears for commercial purposes. Subsistence hunting is allowed in Canada, the U.S. and Greenland, but the total number of bears killed for this purpose is not known. Norway and Russia currently prohibit hunting of any type, although Russia may soon allow a subsistence hunt under a bilateral agreement with the U.S. However, as noted in the proposal, there are concerns about high levels of poaching from the Chukchi/Bering Sea population in Russia; several hundred bears may be poached each year. Polar bear parts resulting from subsistence hunting in the U.S. and Canada can be exported as personal effects by tourists (i.e. handicrafts), and, in the case of Canada, for commercial purposes (e.g. polar bear skin rugs). Greenland established a moratorium on exports of polar bear specimens in 2008. Only Canada allows trophy hunting and permits export of trophies.

### **IN CANADA—THE ONLY RANGE STATE EXPORTING POLAR BEAR SPECIMENS FOR COMMERCIAL PURPOSES—OVER HALF OF THE POPULATIONS ARE DECLINING AND MANY HAVE BEEN OVER-EXPLOITED.**

Although Canada claims that levels of take and export are sustainable, there is strong evidence to the contrary.

At its July 2009 meeting, the IUCN/SSC Polar Bear Specialist Group (PBSG) determined that of the thirteen populations in Canada, 7 are declining, 3 are stable, 1 is increasing and the remaining populations are data deficient. By comparison, the 2005 status report on Canada's populations by the IUCN/SSC PBSG categorized 5 as declining, 5 as stable, 2 as increasing and the remaining population as data deficient. The status of polar bear populations in Canada has therefore deteriorated in the past four years, with two more populations categorized as declining and one fewer as increasing or stable.

The reasons for the worsening status of polar bears in Canada are over-exploitation and habitat loss. The IUCN/SSC PBSG stated in a July 2009 resolution that "scientific evidence indicates that the shared **Baffin Bay** polar bear population has been subject to long-term over-exploitation by Canada and Greenland" and recommended that "the status of polar bears in Canada be re-assessed within the context of ongoing and projected habitat loss." Indeed, polar bears were "severely over-harvested" in 1992–1997 (Taylor et al. 2007). In December 2008, the European Union's Scientific Review Group agreed to a "negative opinion", meaning that Canada could not demonstrate that take levels are sustainable, for the Canadian polar bear subpopulations of **Baffin Bay** and **Kane Basin**, resulting in an EU import ban of polar bear specimens from these two populations. In **Norwegian Bay** and **Lancaster Sound**, harvest simulations suggest that current levels of take are approaching and perhaps exceeding the sustainable yield (Taylor 2008). The U.S. did not approve the **Gulf of Boothia** population for import of sport hunted trophies because they had yet to determine that management is based on scientifically sound quotas ensuring that the population is maintained at a sustainable level (Ragan 2009). In 2001, the U.S. stopped imports of polar bear trophies from **M'Clintock Channel** under an emergency rule after it was discovered that the population had been severely reduced from excessive harvest (USFWS 2008). The **Viscount Melville Sound** population was severely reduced by excessive harvest (ibid).

### **POLAR BEARS ARE THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION DUE TO HABITAT LOSS.**

Polar bears are confined to the circumpolar Arctic sea ice environment within five range States: Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Norway, Russian Federation and the United States. Polar bears are completely dependent on sea ice, which they use for hunting prey, reproduction and movement. Arctic sea ice has been reduced by 8 percent in the past 30 years alone, while summer sea ice has been reduced by 15-20 percent. Record retreats of sea ice were recorded in 2007 and 2008. Sea ice thickness in the Arctic region is also declining. Climate models predict an additional decline of 10-50 percent of annual average sea ice extent by 2100 and the complete loss of summer sea ice in the Arctic in about 30 years. In some locations where sea ice already completely disappears in summer (for example, the Canadian Arctic islands and Svalbard, northern Alaska and Russian Chukotka), polar bear use of land is increasing. The amount of time spent on land is critical because polar bears on land are not able to capture seals, their normal prey, and are more likely to be killed by human hunters. Some experts have concluded that polar bears will not survive the complete loss of summer sea ice (Amstrup et al. 2009).

While other species may respond to warming climates by shifting their distribution to the north, polar bears are already as far north as they can go. Their physiology has a limited capacity to tolerate warm temperatures, and the warming climate is rapidly altering their habitat. Their long generation time and low reproductive rate, and the rapid pace of sea ice loss, means that polar bears are not expected to be able to evolve adaptations to the warming climate in time to avoid extinction. Sea ice changes harm polar bears by increasing the energetic demands of seeking prey. Polar bears in some regions are already demonstrating reduced physical condition, reduced reproductive success, and increased mortality. As changes in habitat become more severe and seasonal rates of change more rapid, catastrophic mortality events that have yet to be realized on a large scale are expected to occur. Observations of drowning (Monnett and

Gleason 2006) may be a prelude to such events. In time these changes will occur throughout the entire range of polar bears and result in range-wide population declines. In 2009, the IUCN/SSC Polar Bear Specialist Group adopted a resolution urging that a precautionary approach be instituted when setting harvest limits in a warming Arctic environment.

### **POLAR BEAR POPULATIONS ARE UNDERGOING A MARKED DECLINE.**

An Appendix I listing requires an inferred or projected "marked decline in the population size in the wild" (Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP14), Annex 1, paragraph C) ii)). Annex 5 of the Resolution states, "a marked recent rate of decline is a percentage decline of 50% or more in the last 10 years or three generations, whichever is the longer." However, the Resolution makes it clear that this is not a numeric threshold and that "these figures are presented only as examples, since it is impossible to give numerical values that are applicable to all taxa because of differences in their biology."

There are an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 polar bears, divided into 19 populations. In 2005, the IUCN/SSC Polar Bear Specialist Group categorized 2 of 19 populations as increasing, 5 as stable, 5 as declining, 6 as data deficient, and 1 unknown. In 2009, the IUCN/SSC PBSG categorized only 1 of 19 populations as increasing, 3 as stable, 8 as declining, and 7 as data deficient or unknown. The status of polar bear populations globally has therefore deteriorated over the past four years.

In 2008, the IUCN listed the polar bear as Vulnerable, based on IUCN Red List criterion A3c, with a suspected population reduction of >30% within three generations (45 years) due to decline in area of occupancy, extent of occurrence and habitat quality. If the summer sea ice completely disappears in the next 30 years, the decline of polar bear populations over the next three generations will likely be far more drastic. Polar bears have a low reproductive rate with females reaching sexual maturity at 4-5 years in age and producing on average less than two cubs every three years. Mortality of cubs is high, sometimes exceeding 70%. In 2007, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), using the best science available, predicted range-wide polar bear population declines of approximately 71% of total population within 45 years and 80% within a century (Amstrup et al. 2007). The USGS projection must be viewed as conservative because the actual observed rate of sea ice loss has exceeded that used to make the projection. Polar bear populations can therefore be projected to have a marked decline in the population size in the wild -- a decline that, clearly, is already taking place.

**The polar bear satisfies the biological and trade criteria for inclusion in CITES Appendix I. Transfer to Appendix I is necessary to ensure that primarily commercial trade does not compound the threats posed to the species by loss of habitat. SSN strongly urges Parties to support this proposal.**

-Revised 14 December 2009

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