




ON THE PRECIPICE



WHY INTERNATIONAL
COMMERCIAL TRADE
IN POLAR BEARS
SHOULD BE
ELIMINATED



“POLAR BEAR IS A RARE ANIMAL.
NOT A LOT OF OTHER PLACES SELL
THEM—ONLY CANADA”

- Zhiqing Xu, who bought two polar bear
hides destined for China as gifts in a
January 2012 auction in Canada

32,350

POLAR BEAR SPECIMENS (POLAR
BEARS DEAD OR ALIVE, AND THEIR
PARTS AND DERIVATIVES) WERE
TRADED INTERNATIONALLY FOR ALL
PURPOSES BETWEEN 2001 AND 2010



Despite the growing threats of climate change, toxic pollution and oil development that jeopardize polar bears and their habitat, hundreds of polar bears are still killed each year for their fur and body parts, which are sold in the international market. The United States, supported by the Russian Federation, has proposed to ban the international commercial trade in polar bears under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Now the fate of polar bears rests in the hands of the 176 countries that are Parties to the Convention that will vote on this proposal at the upcoming CITES meeting in Thailand, in March 2013. At the meeting, the Parties should ensure that the international commercial trade in polar bears comes to an end in order to eliminate this threat to the species' survival.



20,000-
25,000

ESTIMATED POPULATION
OF POLAR BEARS

15,000

OF THE WORLD'S POLAR BEARS LIVE
IN CANADA—THE ONLY COUNTRY THAT
ALLOWS POLAR BEARS TO BE KILLED
FOR GLOBAL TRADE IN THEIR SKINS
AND PARTS

POLAR BEARS ARE AFFECTED BY TRADE

Canada is the only country in the world where polar bears are hunted for international commercial trade and sport. In 2012, polar bear skins were auctioned off for record prices and the highest number of polar bear skins appeared on Canadian auction blocks since 2007. This increase in prices and trade, coupled with evidence that polar bear populations in Canada (one of only five countries where polar bears can be found) are declining, is alarming. In fact, new evidence regarding the increase in trade and Canada's unsustainable harvest was a factor in the Russian Federation's decision to commit to supporting the U.S. proposal to CITES.

EVIDENCE OF DECLINING POLAR BEAR POPULATIONS IN CANADA IS MOUNTING

Canadian polar bear kills are taking place in populations already struggling to survive severe habitat destruction. Indeed, the IUCN Polar Bear Specialist Group (IUCN PBSG) found that half of the 13 populations of polar bears that fall fully or partially in Canada are declining. Three populations are stable; two are lacking enough data to determine population changes; and the only population of Canadian bears on the rise—representing just 2 percent of Canada's total bear count—is attributed largely to a reduction in quota introduced for that population due to historical overhunting.

**"SUDDENLY HUNTERS HEARD,
'PEOPLE WILL GIVE US MONEY
EVEN BEFORE WE HUNT!"**

- said Drikus Gissing, director of wildlife management for the Nunavut government



CANADA'S KILL QUOTAS ARE EXPLODING

Although Canada's polar bear populations may have been well-managed in the past, the IUCN PBSG has concluded that most of Canada's 13 polar bear populations are declining and have a high or very high risk of future decline. Only one of Canada's polar bear populations is increasing and that is because it was severely over hunted in the past and now is recovering. Five of Canada's polar bear populations, such as the Baffin Bay and Kane Basin populations in the Canadian Territory of Nunavut, have not been surveyed in more than 15 years.

Nonetheless, Canada's harvest quotas have increased dramatically. In 2011, the Nunavut territory of Canada tripled the hunting quota for the Western Hudson Bay polar bear population despite opposition from the federal government and the IUCN PBSG, which stated that "even the present [total allowable harvest] is not sustainable so an increase only makes the resulting overharvest even less sustainable." In 2012, Nunavut *again* proposed to increase its harvest quota for the Western Hudson Bay polar bear population by another 12 percent for the 2012-2013 hunting season—a proposal that again was strongly opposed by the IUCN PBSG.

There is evidence that the spike in polar bear hide prices has contributed to over-harvesting in at least one other jurisdiction—Quebec, a province that until this year had no hunting quota. Before 2011, the kill average was 4 polar bears per year. But that year, hunters from the northern Quebec community of Inukjuak killed as many as 70 polar bears—an enormous jump over past years and an unsustainable harvest rate for the Southern Hudson Bay polar bear population, which scientists worry is already under pressure from climate change. In response, a quota was established but is not considered to be sustainable.

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN POLAR BEAR KILLS AND DEMAND FOR POLAR BEAR HIDES IS STRENGTHENING

Rising and unsustainable hunting quotas and harvest levels are likely motivated in part by the growing international demand for polar bear hides. In the last 5 years, the number of hides offered at auction has more than tripled from 40 to 150. During the same period, the average hide price achieved at auction doubled from USD\$2,097 to USD\$5,211 and the maximum hide price achieved at auction doubled from USD\$6,100 in 2007 to USD\$12,514 in 2012. And the spike in kills around Inukjuak is thought to have begun when a buyer arrived in the region and announced that he would pay significant money in advance for furs.

From 2007 to 2012, there was a

375%
INCREASE
IN THE NUMBER
OF POLAR BEAR
SKINS OFFERED
AT AUCTION

SCIENTISTS AGREE THAT POLAR BEARS ARE THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION



In 2005, the IUCN reclassified the polar bear from a species of “Least Concern” to one of the threatened categories, “Vulnerable.” IUCN confirmed this status in 2008 but the polar bear has not been reassessed since then. The IUCN PBSG concluded that polar bears may disappear from most of their range within 100 years.

In September 2007, the United States Geological Survey released a report researched and prepared by leading polar bear and climate scientists from the governments of the United States and Canada, the private sector, and academia. The report concluded that two-thirds of the world’s polar bears will likely be extinct by the year 2050 and, by the end of the century, only a small population in central Canada was likely to survive.

Two months later, a study by the University of Alberta found that polar bear populations may suddenly collapse if trophy hunters kill too many males. According to the study, hunting has already tilted the balance in some Canadian polar bear populations. Because current Canadian wildlife management policies encourage hunters to go after male bears in order to conserve females, females have had more difficulty finding mates.

The United States has listed polar bears as a threatened species under the United States’ Endangered Species Act, citing the risk of the species eventually becoming extinct due to the melting of its sea ice habitat. Polar bears rely on sea ice to locate and catch seals, a crucial food source, during spring and early summer. Polar bears also rely on sea ice to migrate, to find mates, and will sometime even use sea ice to den and give birth to their cubs.

But because of climate change, the sea ice is melting earlier and forming later each year. This means the bears are fasting for longer, dramatically reducing their body weight and physical condition, making reproduction impossible, and making it harder for them to survive the summer season. This dwindling sea ice, and the increase in human activity in the Arctic, also means that hungry bears are spending more time on land and are more likely to come into conflict with people. As things get worse, many polar bears face serious challenges to their survival.

In addition to climate change, another threat to polar bears is increased industrial activities in the Arctic, including oil and gas exploration and development, which is escalating the deterioration of the polar bear’s remaining fragile habitat and increases the risk of oil spills—for which there is no proven technology to combat in ice-covered water. Polar bears are also exposed to toxic chemicals, such as mercury and persistent organic pollutants, and absorb large quantities of these substances, which can cause damage to internal organs and have reproductive effects.

ACCORDING TO THE U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY
WE WILL HAVE LOST TWO-THIRDS OF THE WORLD’S
POLAR BEARS BY 2050.



FALSE OR FACT: THE REAL SITUATION IN CANADA WITH POLAR BEARS

FALSE Canada's polar bear population is stable and has increased slightly.

FACT Polar bears in Canada are composed of 13 separately managed populations. According to the IUCN PBSG, which is composed of the world's foremost polar bear scientists, more than half of these populations are declining. Only three populations are stable. Two are data deficient. And only one population, representing a mere 2 percent of Canada's bears, is increasing—due largely to a quota reduction spurred by overhunting.

FALSE Canada's harvest quotas are not market-driven but based on principles of conservation, science, and Aboriginal subsistence.

FACT Polar bear quotas in Canada are set by Provincial and Territorial wildlife management boards. Although these boards consider scientific advice, the quotas they set are not limited by it and may be modified by other factors. As a result, quotas for individual polar bear populations are often set well above scientific recommendations. Of the 600 polar bears killed in Canada each year, the parts of more than half of them are traded internationally.

FALSE Canada is taking international and domestic action to protect polar bears through a comprehensive approach to polar bear management, legislation, and research.

FACT Canada is a party to the Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears (1973). However, its management of polar bear quotas, which allow harvest levels to be set above those recommended by scientists, violates the Agreement, which states in Article II that "[e]ach Contracting Party...shall manage polar bear populations in accordance with sound conservation practices based on the best available scientific data." In addition, Canada's unique federal structure and the Land Claims it has settled with its First Nations place final authority over quotas with local wildlife management boards—the federal government has no veto when quotas are set at unsustainable levels.

FALSE Although polar bears may face habitat changes due to climate change, CITES can't help protect the species from climate change.

FACT Although climate change is the top threat to polar bears, international trade, sport, and subsistence hunting make up a close second contributing to the deaths of about 600 bears a year. It is a fundamental tenant of conservation biology that to help species challenged by threats such as climate change, other population stressors (e.g., unsustainable harvest for non subsistence purposes) must be reduced. Current Canadian management ignores this reality.

"[F]OUR YEARS AGO, WE WERE LUCKY TO GET A THOUSAND DOLLARS FOR A 7-FOOT POLAR BEAR. NOW, YOU CAN SELL THAT 7-FOOT POLAR BEAR FOR BETWEEN \$3,500 AND \$4,000."

- Frank Pokiak, chairman of the Inuvialuit Games Council in northwestern Canada

"IN THE PAST, RAW, UNTREATED POLAR BEAR SKINS RARELY FETCHED MUCH MORE THAN \$5,000—AND USUALLY MUCH LESS THAN THAT. NOT ANYMORE. THE LAST TWO YEARS THEY'VE GONE UP BY OVER 200 PERCENT"

- Dag Larsen, a Toronto broker scouting furs for clients in Greece, Russia and Norway

INDIGENOUS SUBSISTENCE HUNTING WOULD NOT BE AFFECTED BY THE PROPOSAL TO ELIMINATE INTERNATIONAL COMMERCIAL TRADE UNDER CITES

Polar bears have been hunted for their hides and meat by native peoples of the Arctic region for centuries. A listing of the polar bear on CITES Appendix I will not affect the ability of native peoples to continue to use polar bears in this way. The listing will only stop the international commercial trade in polar bears and their parts. International commercial trade is not a subsistence activity. Nor would a CITES Appendix I listing stop trophy hunting by Canadian nationals or foreigners. First, CITES only governs international trade so if the polar bear trophy remains in Canada it will not be affected by CITES. Second, CITES does not prohibit international trade of a non-commercial nature, such as the movement of trophies from Canada to other countries.



THE URGENT CALL FOR ACTION

CITES PARTIES SHOULD JOIN RUSSIA AND THE UNITED STATES TO PROTECT POLAR BEARS



“IT IS WORSE FOR RUSSIAN POLAR BEARS THAN THE BEARS IN CANADA OR GREENLAND BECAUSE THE PACK ICE IS RETREATING MUCH FASTER IN OUR WATERS. THE BEST HABITAT IS QUICKLY DISAPPEARING. IT IS EXTREME.”

- Nikita Ovsyannikov, deputy director of Russia's polar bear reserve on Wrangel Island in the Chukchi Sea northwest of Alaska

The United States and Russia have come together to push for complete protection for the polar bear from international commercial trade by changing its status under CITES from Appendix II to Appendix I. But the proposal needs the votes of two-thirds of the Parties at the March 2013 CITES meeting to pass. CITES Parties must stand up and voice their concern to protect the world's polar bears.

The EU already recognized that some of Canada's harvests are unsustainable when it banned imports from two Canadian polar bear populations—Kane Basin and Baffin Bay—in 2008. Today, only one European Union member, Denmark (through Greenland), has polar bear populations. Although subsistence use of polar bears

in Greenland is allowed, Greenland voluntarily prohibited the export of its polar bears into international commercial trade. Accordingly, because the management of polar bears by European Union countries would not be significantly affected by a transfer to Appendix I, it is difficult to grasp why these countries would not support this important initiative. And because a transfer to Appendix I of CITES would not prohibit trophy hunting of polar bears or international movement of trophies, but simply require importing countries to find the hunt was conducted in an ecologically responsible manner, again trophy hunters should also be supportive of this critical listing. Finally, as this would have no impact on subsistence hunting of polar bears by native peoples of Canada or elsewhere, there is no impact of a CITES listing on traditional uses of polar bears.

For policy documents supporting these documents, please visit: <http://www.nrdc.org/wildlife/cites/polar-bear>



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