

WWF and Polar Bear Conservation

Working around the Arctic to secure a future for polar bears



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Polar bear walking on ice,
Spitsbergen, Svalbard,
Norway.

Polar bears, the charismatic icon of the Arctic environment, have long been a focus in WWF's on-the-ground research and conservation projects in the Arctic, going back to 1972 – and climate change is a primary focus of our global conservation efforts.

WWF has been a conservation presence in the Arctic for nearly 40 years and has created a strong voice for the conservation of biodiversity, protected areas, wildlife and the well-being of local and Indigenous peoples. WWF is actively engaged in ongoing work in all of the Arctic countries, with offices in every

country where polar bears are found, including in Arctic communities. WWF has permanent observer status in the Arctic Council, a coordinating body for work on the environment and sustainable development involving Arctic states and Indigenous peoples.

THREATS TO POLAR BEARS

The **loss of sea ice habitat from climate change** is the biggest threat to the survival of polar bears.

Other key threats include

- polar bear-human conflicts
- overharvesting
- industrial impacts

WHAT WWF IS DOING FOR POLAR BEARS

Addressing climate change

WWF has a dedicated team working on issues of climate and energy. This world-wide team works on a regional and national basis from WWF offices, and also takes part in international projects that cross boundaries. We support research on climate change effects, and show the way forward through funding research and analysis on alternative methods of generating the energy we need to power our economies.

WWF advocates directly for governments to recognize and mitigate the effects of climate change on polar bears. At meetings of the states that have polar bear populations, WWF has successfully pushed for



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a statement formally recognizing the urgent need for an effective global response that will address the challenges of climate change. WWF has also successfully advocated for the creation of an international polar bear management plan.

Protecting critical habitat for polar bears

WWF recognizes the urgency of protecting habitat for polar bears as they rapidly lose their sea ice habitat from climate change. We support the identification and protection of important polar bear habitat (denning areas and movement corridors, seasonal feeding areas/times, and key resting areas during the ice free period). Not all Arctic areas are created equal for polar bears—some areas are more important than others because of the opportunities they create for the bears to feed, and for females to den and give birth. WWF is supporting research to identify these high value habitat areas and is working with partners to conserve these places.

This can take the form of protected areas, such as Polar Bear Pass National Wildlife Area in Canada's High Arctic, and the Russian Arctic Park on the northern part of the island of Novaya Zemlya above Russia. WWF advocated for the creation of both of these protected areas, and is involved in many more such plans. WWF has provided extensive financial support to the Wrangel Island Nature Reserve, known as the "polar bear nursery" for its high concentration of polar bear maternity dens. WWF won Wrangel Island as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004 and in 2012, successfully advocated for the significant expansion of a marine buffer zone around Wrangel Island and its smaller neighbour, Herald Island.

Reducing industrial impacts

WWF accepts that it is unreasonable to designate the whole Arctic as a place of no industrial activity. The Arctic is not like the Antarctic; it is occupied by more than four million people. While some of these people continue subsistence lifestyles, others want a place in the modern wage economy which often means jobs from exploitation of non-renewable resources. WWF's goal is to ensure that whatever development takes place is sustainable, that it does not damage wildlife populations and ecosystems to any great extent.

WWF's oil and gas work in the Arctic has included analyzing the technical capacities available to prevent and respond to oil spills, and has advocated for the application of the highest development standards through national and international venues. WWF staff have played pivotal role in providing expertise to the Arctic Council to help draft a new binding agreement on oil spill preparedness and response. We have collaborated with scientists, conservationists and local people in opposing oil and gas development in some

areas that are too valuable ecologically to expose to the risk of unproven Arctic oil spill clean-up procedures.

Around the Arctic, WWF is preparing maps to help ships stay clear of ecologically sensitive places. We are advocating for best practices for shipping in the Arctic, and continue to work at the International Maritime Organization on a polar code that would make Arctic shipping safer.

Creating safer communities

To most of the world, the polar bear is a big white fluffy huggable animal. To people who live with polar bears, these animals are large and dangerous predators. Keeping polar bears separate from people is better for both—as polar bears that wander into communities pose a risk to people, and people often respond by killing the bears.

WWF has responded with a variety of locally-led initiatives to help reduce conflict. In northern Canada, we've provided steel food storage containers, so that local people can continue to store their food outside but protect it from marauding bears, and electric fences to separate bears from dog teams. In Russia, WWF-supported polar bear patrols deter bears before they get into populated areas. WWF has also sponsored a review of polar bear human conflicts in East Greenland, to learn more about why they occur. We are also convening workshops that involve people from around the polar bear countries, so they can share their experiences and successes in keeping the peace between people and bears.



Polar bear patrol at work in Chukotka, Russia.

Promoting sustainable tourism

WWF spent many years working with tourism operators in areas inhabited by polar bears to find ways to limit the impact of tourists on the bears and their habitat. While we want to see local people benefit from tourism, it will be to nobody's benefit if tourism drives away the sights the tourists have come to see. The result of the work was a set of principles for Arctic tourism. These principles have been adopted by some tourism operators, and have formed the basis for tourism codes of conduct in the Arctic. WWF is now collaborating with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature to assess the specific impact of polar bear tourism.



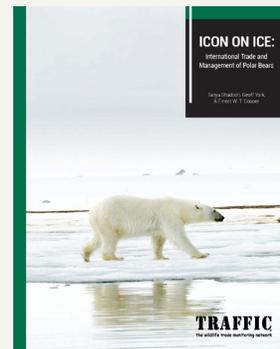
Polar Bear ecotourism, Churchill, Canada

Addressing overharvesting

WWF supports the right of Indigenous peoples to continue to sustainably harvest local animals. We work with scientists, governments, local leaders and Indigenous communities to support the implementation of sound management and monitoring practices that can include human use where it meets viable management objectives. Illegal wildlife trade is a major driver of threats to many wildlife species around the world. To help monitor, track, and analyze that trade,

WWF helped set up a partner organization, "Traffic" the only global organization to specialize in wildlife trade issues.

Traffic's recent analysis of trade in polar bears, "Icon on Ice: International Trade and Management of Polar Bears" concludes that international commercial trade is not a major threat to polar bears. The report makes recommendations that would improve current management of trade and make sure that it does not become detrimental to polar bears.



Learning about the bears

Despite their occasional visits to communities, polar bears spend much of their lives living far away from people, out on the sea ice. This makes it difficult to learn about their lives, especially at the population level. The world's leading polar bear biologists estimate that the global population of polar bears is 20,000-25,000 but many of the estimates on which that figure is built are not much more than educated guesses. If we want to build meaningful management plans for the bears, we have to know more about them, particularly their "vital signs" such as body condition, reproduction, and cub survival. Trends in polar bear populations are even more important than hard numbers. WWF has contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to these surveys, and continues to do so. We are backing polar bear researchers trying to find out more about the ways in which polar bears are adapting to climate change in places such as Svalbard (north of Norway) where we support the activities of Norwegian Polar Institute researchers. For many years, we have run a polar bear tracker web site, using data from WWF-supported researcher teams to track some of the animals by satellite.



Norwegian Polar Institute researcher Magnus Andersen examining the head of a male adult polar bear on Svalbard, Norway.

Science is one part of the equation when it comes to creating management for polar bear populations – the other part is the knowledge of people who live with the bears. Sometimes called traditional ecological knowledge, this is based not just on present-day observations, but also on generations-worth of accumulated wisdom about the natural world. In 2005, WWF supported the Inuit Qaujimaningit Nanurtt (Inuit knowledge of polar bears) project in Arctic Canada, including the publication of a book. We continue to work with Indigenous peoples to help collect and pass on their knowledge.

Anticipating the future of polar bears

Some of the prime territory for polar bears will be lost over the next few decades as sea ice decreases in spring and summer according to an influential 2009 paper published by several of the world's top polar bear scientists. These losses over the next few decades are expected to be particularly acute across the European, Asian, and Alaskan ranges of polar bears. At the same time, sea ice is expected to be largely unchanged above Canada's high Arctic islands, and north Greenland. The paper suggests that this area will be increasingly important for maintaining healthy polar bear populations.

WWF has followed the scientists' advice and is making this "Last Ice Area" a project focus. For the past two years, WWF has been investing in research, and consulting with local people and national governments on how this area should be managed in the future. By convening this conversation now, we intend to be able to help work out a management plan that respects the unique future conservation value of the area, while respecting the needs of the nearest communities.



Why we are here

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

panda.org/arctic

Information

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