



The 16th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties

U.S. Proposal to Transfer the Polar Bear to CITES Appendix I

The United States of America has submitted a proposal for consideration at the 16th Meeting of the CITES Conference of the Parties (CoP16) to transfer the polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*) from CITES Appendix II to Appendix I. Adoption of this proposal requires a two-thirds majority of CITES Parties present and voting at CoP16.

What is CITES?

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), an international agreement signed by 176 nations, is designed to ensure that international trade in animals and plants does not threaten their survival in the wild. The Parties to CITES meet every two to three years at a Conference of the Parties (CoP). During this meeting, they review and vote on (1) amendments to the appendices under which species are included in CITES; and (2) proposed resolutions and decisions to improve the effectiveness of CITES. CoP16 will take place in Bangkok, Thailand, during March 3-14, 2013.¹

Species protected by CITES are included in one of three appendices:

- Appendix I includes species threatened with extinction and provides the greatest level of protection, including restrictions on commercial trade.
- Appendix II includes species that, although currently not threatened with extinction, may become so without trade controls. Trade is regulated through a permitting system.
- Appendix III includes species protected by at least one country, which needs assistance from other Parties to regulate trade.

Why is the United States proposing to include polar bears in Appendix I?

The United States has determined that the polar bear qualifies for inclusion in Appendix I. Article II of the CITES text provides that Appendix I shall include all species threatened with extinction which are or may be affected by trade. The polar bear is affected by trade within the context of CITES. About 800 polar bears are harvested by subsistence hunters each year. From 2001 through 2010, an average of 3,200 items made from polar bears were exported or re-exported annually from range countries. Their geographic range covers five countries: Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Norway, Russian Federation, and the United States. This represents about 400 to 500 polar bears. Most of these items came from wild polar bears from Canada. About 70 countries reported polar bear imports. Over time, trade in polar bears has remained relatively high, while trade in skins has increased. The current level of trade may have a detrimental impact on the status of the species because trade, particularly commercial trade,

compounds the threat to the species posed by habitat loss.

At CoP15, the United States submitted a proposal to transfer the polar bear from Appendix II to Appendix I of CITES; however, the proposal did not receive support from the other polar bear range countries and was not adopted. Since CoP15, the conservation status of the polar bear has continued to draw international attention. Peer-reviewed, technical publications have documented a decrease in biological parameters of some subpopulations of polar bear, such as mean body weight or reproductive success. In our consultation with other range countries regarding the status of polar bears, we have learned that the Russian Federation will support the proposal to transfer polar bears to Appendix I at CoP16.

This information suggests that further analyses and conservation measures within the context of CITES may be necessary to address international conservation concerns. The polar bear is



¹ For more information on CITES and CoP16, see our web page at <http://www.fws.gov/international/cites/cop16/>

included in the IUCN/SSC Red List of Threatened Species as Vulnerable (2008). The IUCN/SSC Red List and its ranking system are widely recognized as the most comprehensive, objective global approach for assessing the conservation status of plant and animal species.

In the United States, the polar bear has been protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) since 1972 and listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as a Threatened species since 2008. The polar bear has been included in CITES Appendix II since 1975. An Appendix-I listing of polar bears will strengthen conservation of this species range-wide by ensuring that international trade does not threaten the polar bear's survival in the wild. Trade in sport-hunted trophies of Appendix-I specimens is not necessarily prohibited by CITES. If approved by the CITES Parties, trade in sport-hunted trophies could be allowed with the appropriate permits; however, trade in polar bears – including skins, furs, and items made from polar bear parts – for primarily commercial purposes would be prohibited.

Would inclusion of polar bears in Appendix I affect the creation, sale, or international movement of Alaskan native handicrafts?

CITES only regulates international trade. Inclusion of polar bears in Appendix I would not affect the subsistence harvest of polar bears by Alaskan natives or the creation of handicrafts using parts of polar bears. Inclusion of the polar bear in Appendix I would not limit the ability of Alaskan natives to sell handicrafts containing polar bear parts within the United States, or limit the ability of individuals who purchase handicrafts to transport them within the United States.

Inclusion of polar bears in Appendix I, however, could reduce the foreign tourist market for Alaskan native handicrafts because of the difficulty in meeting the permitting requirements for export of tourist items from the United States. The Service is analyzing whether there are options available, compliant with CITES, the MMPA, and the ESA, that could allow trade by foreign tourists. If the Appendix-I proposal is adopted for polar bear, the Service will provide further guidance to the public on this matter.

If the proposal to include polar bears in Appendix I were to be adopted, cultural



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exchange activities allowed by the MMPA and occurring between Alaskan natives and other indigenous people in Canada, Russian Federation, and Greenland would not be precluded, but would require import and export permits.

What do we know about polar bears?

Polar bears are the largest member of the bear family, with the exception of Alaska's Kodiak brown bears, which can equal polar bears in size. Polar bears are specially adapted to the polar marine environment in which they live. To survive in the harsh Arctic climate, polar bears have developed several adaptations, including white coloration for camouflage, water-repellent guard hairs, dense under-fur, black skin for absorbing warmth, and the ability to store large amounts of fat when food is available. The polar bears' primary food source is the ringed seal, but they also hunt bearded seals, walruses, and beluga whales, and will also scavenge on beached carrion such as whale, walrus, and seal carcasses found along the coast.

Polar bears generally live alone except when concentrating along the coast during the open-water period, or when mating or rearing cubs. Pregnant females enter maternity dens in late fall and give birth to one to three cubs in December or January. Cubs remain with their mother for over 2 years. Polar bears are long-lived carnivores with relatively low rates of reproduction and natural mortality.

The polar bears' primary habitat is sea ice. They depend on sea ice as a platform for hunting, seasonal and long-distance movements, travel to maternal denning areas, resting, and mating. Polar bears are not evenly distributed throughout the Arctic, nor do they comprise a single nomadic population, but rather occur in 19 subpopulations throughout the ice-covered marine waters of the Northern Hemisphere. The United States contains portions of two subpopulations: the

Chukchi Sea (CS) and the Southern Beaufort Sea (SBS) subpopulations, shared with the Russian Federation and Canada, respectively.

Although a precise population estimate does not currently exist for polar bears in Alaska, the SBS population is estimated to be approximately 1,500 bears, while the size of the CS population is unknown. Globally, the total polar bear population size is estimated to be 20,000 to 25,000 individuals.

What are the threats to polar bears?

The main threat to polar bears is the loss of sea ice habitat due to circumpolar warming. Recorded declines in sea ice have been correlated with declines in polar bear body condition, survival rates, and population size in portions of their range. The extent and duration of sea ice is projected to continue to decline into the foreseeable future. Summer sea ice is especially at risk with some scientists predicting its complete disappearance within 30 years.

The amount of ice is critical because polar bears are less able to capture their usual prey items while confined to land and are more likely to encounter humans and be killed due to human-wildlife conflicts. Continued sea ice changes will greatly impact polar bears by increasing the time and energy needed to find prey. As a result, polar bears will have less energy for other activities. Remaining members of many populations may migrate to new areas, at least seasonally, moving into habitats with less prey and increasing levels of negative bear-human interactions.

Polar bear populations also are susceptible to other activities associated with humans, such as offshore development, habitat alteration, and defense-of-life incidents. These and other stressors, including that of commercial international trade, compound the threat to polar bears posed by habitat loss.

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