

Polar bear numbers up, but rescue continues

Don Martin in Ottawa

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Their status ranges from a "vulnerable" to "endangered" and could be declared "threatened" if the U.S. decides the polar bear is collateral damage of climate change.

Nobody talks about "overpopulated" when discussing the bears' outlook.

Yet despite the Canadian government's \$150-million commitment last week to fund 44 International Polar Year research projects, a key question is not up for detailed scientific assessment: If the polar bear is the 650-kilogram canary in the climate change coal mine, why are its numbers INCREASING?

The latest government survey of polar bears roaming the vast Arctic expanses of northern Quebec, Labrador and southern Baffin Island show the population of polar bears has jumped to 2,100 animals from around 800 in the mid-1980s.

As recently as three years ago, a less official count placed the number at 1,400.

The Inuit have always insisted the bears' demise was greatly exaggerated by scientists doing projections based on fly-over counts, but their input was usually dismissed as the ramblings of self-interested hunters.

As Nunavut government biologist Mitch Taylor observed in a front-page story in the Nunatsiq News last month, "the Inuit were right. There aren't just a few more bears. There are a hell of a lot more bears."

Their widely portrayed lurch toward extinction on a steadily melting ice cap is not supported by bear counts in other Arctic regions either.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is collecting feedback on whether to declare the polar bear "threatened" under its Endangered Species Act, joining the likes of the rare red-cockaded woodpecker, the lesser prairie chicken and the Sonoran pronghorn, which are afforded official protection and species recovery management. The service held its first public hearing on the polar bear project last night in Washington D.C.

But background papers for the debate hardly justify a rush to protect the bear from extinction if its icy habitat fades to green.

The service identifies six Arctic regions where data are insufficient to make a call on the population, including the aforementioned Baffin shores area.

Another six areas are listed as having stable counts, three experienced reduced numbers and two have seen their bears increase.

Inuit also argue the bear population is on the rise along western Hudson Bay, in sharp contrast to the Canadian Wildlife Service, which projects a 22% decline in bear numbers.

Far be it for me to act as a climate-change denier, but that's hardly overwhelming proof of a species in peril in Canada, which claims roughly two thirds of the world's polar bear population.



CREDIT: Chris Wattie, Reuters
Stephen Harper.

Reading international coverage of the bear, it's obvious Canada has become home to the official poster species for extinction by climate change.

Everywhere you look, the "doomed" polar bear's story is illustrated with the classic photo of a mother and cub teetering on an fragile-looking ice floe, the ice full of holes and seemingly about to disappear into the sea.

"The drama is clear: This is truly the tip of an iceberg, the bears are desperately stranded as the water swells around them," according to a recent article in The Observer magazine carrying the photo.

Something's always bothered me about that photo, which has been vilified on the Internet as a fake.

Even if it's the real thing, the photographer was clearly standing on something solid not far from his forlorn looking subjects.

For a species that can swim dozens of kilometres to find a decent seal dinner, a few hundred metres to shore is a leisurely doggie paddle to safety. So much for the optic of a doomed global warming victim on ice.

Of course, tracking polar bear populations is an inexact science.

They roam about, which lends itself to double counting, and they're not easy to identify from any distance.

Besides, polar bears do live on ice and satellite photos show the sea ice is down 7.7% in the last decade. So something is happening up there.

But while Prime Minister Stephen Harper has embraced the religion of climate change and vows to combat it with billions of new dollars, the bear facts suggest the challenge facing our great white symbol may be more about too many bears than too little ice.

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