Polar Bears miss the message on Global

These magnificent carnivores are thriving, despite excessive claims of their impending doom.
By Susan Crockford, Ph.D.

Warming

A polar bear feeds on the jaws of a bowhead whale harvested by natives along the coast of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.
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Last summer, one of the most experienced polar bear researchers alive, Ian Stirling (formerly of the Canadian Wildlife Service), speculated in *The Guardian* newspaper in the United Kingdom that the death of a single old bear on Svalbard, Norway, could be blamed on global warming. "This 16-year-old male polar bear," said the caption of a photo of an emaciated bear splayed out on the tundra, "died of starvation resulting from the lack of ice on which to hunt seals, according to Dr. Ian Stirling." The story was picked up by news outlets all over the world.

Most disturbing was that there was no disclaimer from Stirling pointing out that 16 years is near the maximum life expectancy for polar bear males in the wild, or that starvation is the primary cause of death for very old and young bears alike, whatever the state of sea-ice coverage. Many people picked up on the irrationality of the claim that one old bear had "died of climate change," even committed conservationists who accepted the tenets of catastrophic anthropogenic global warming (CAGW). Some of the criticisms of Stirling in social media were harsh.

For example, one reader of the Facebook page of Polar Bears International responded to PBI's explanation that Stirling only said the bear "likely" died of starvation, replying: "'Likely' does not cut it in science. This bear could have been injured or ill. I admire much of the work you do; but science is science. A hypothesis needs *empirical* evidence in order to be confirmed. You cannot try and make the science match your cause. No one is a bigger advocate for animal rights than I am; but I am also an advocate for the truth." (Note, sometime before April 28, 2014, the original post on this story plus a follow-up one, along with all comments, were deleted from PBI's Facebook page.)

And from the original *Guardian* story, the day it was published: "Is it a scientific fact that polar bears never suffer from any illnesses at all and would live forever if it were not for climate change?" Similar criticisms could be found in all outlets that carried the story. The polar bear as an icon for CAGW lost significant value that week and, I suspect, so did respect for Ian Stirling.

Nonprofit conservation organizations—like the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF), Greenpeace, Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club, and Polar Bears International—may still be hawking "save the polar bears" as a market-

ing tool, but its value is lost on all but the eternally gullible. Unfortunately for those hoping to profit from fearmongering, polar bears have already been saved from the most serious threat to their existence—wanton overhunting—and recent sea-ice declines have so far had no definitively negative effect on their numbers.

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In a recent TV ad campaign, the Center for Biological Diversity said, "global warming is pushing polar bears to the absolute brink." Results of recent research show this to be a lie—fat, healthy bears like this one from near Barrow, Alaska, are still common and many of the assumptions used by computer models to predict future disasters have turned out to be wrong.

Saved from the threat of extinction

Commercial whalers slaughtered thousands of polar bears a year during the late 1800s. After World War II, unregulated hunting again decimated their numbers. By 1956, Russia had an outright ban on polar bear hunting and in 1965, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the most influential conservation group in the world, listed the polar bear as "vulnerable" in its famous Red Data Book of rare and endangered species.

In 1973, an international treaty to restrict hunting was brokered by the Polar Bear Specialist Group (PBSG), a science advisory body set up in 1968 as an arm of the IUCN composed of the world's leading polar bear researchers from Canada, Russia, Norway, Denmark (for Greenland) and the United States. Polar bear numbers worldwide recovered quickly after the treaty was signed, just as sea otters, humpback whales and elephant seals had before them. By 1996, polar bears were downgraded in the IUCN's Red Book to "least concern," where they remained until 2006.

"Least concern" is an apt description of the current conservation status of the polar bear, one it really should have retained. Its global population size (as far as is known) has been stable for more than 30 years and is well distributed throughout its available habitat—two accepted characteristics of a healthy species.

Threatened with extinction?

How, then, did polar bears move so quickly from a healthy species to one considered likely to become threatened with extinction?

In the early 2000s, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) employee Scott Schliebe suggested to other PBSG members that future threats of sea-ice loss predicted to occur over the next 45 years could be used to convince the IUCN to reinstate the status of polar bears to vulnerable, despite being healthy at that time. And it worked: the IUCN accepted the recommendation of the PBSG that future global warming predicted by computer models was a greater threat to polar bears than overhunting. In 2006, the IUCN upgraded the status of the polar bear to vulnerable.

U.S. members of the PBSG moved without delay to apply the same argument at home, which ironically manages the smallest number of polar bears of all PBSG member nations. Success again: in 2008, polar bears were listed as threatened by FWS (a similar level of threat as the IUCN's vulnerable status, meaning "likely to become endangered with extinction") under the Endangered Species Act. This was the first time FWS had accepted future threats as a decisive factor for declaring a species threatened, almost certainly due to the assertions that harm was already underway, as pointed out by Matthew Cronin in "Polar Bears: Are they really endangered?" (*RANGE*, Winter 2009.)

The trouble is, recent research refutes much of the evidence hastily used in both decisions and raises serious questions about the validity of the rest. Polar bears are not responding as predicted to the sea-ice changes that have already occurred, and it is now apparent that much of the information used was collected over time periods too short to determine meaningful trends. In addition, the methodology used in one U.S. study was flawed—even the PBSG admitted this last point in its most recent status update (see sidebar, next page).

Nothing but good news

Over the last three years, there has been nothing but good news from polar bear research. Aerial surveys of all three Hudson Bay populations (western, southern, and northern, aka Foxe Basin) show no evidence of the declines in numbers predicted by the biologists' models. Polar bear numbers in Davis Strait (to the west of Greenland) were found to be increasing despite declines in sea ice, also contrary to predictions.

But most significant was the news out of the western Arctic. Polar bears in the Chukchi Sea, which the United States shares with Russia, had been assessed by the PBSG in 2009 as declining due to "some of the greatest sea-ice losses in the Arctic." However, research conducted between 2008 and 2011 found the bears to be in excellent physical condition (i.e., fat) and reproducing well, in marked contrast to predictions. Only Foxe Basin bears were in better condition than Chukchi bears, indicating that the population was probably stable (like the Foxe Basin population) or perhaps even increasing.

The exceptionally good condition of

Chukchi bears should have been embraced as the best news imaginable. However, polar bear researchers and their employers, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), instead kept almost entirely silent. There was no press release issued to the media about the Chukchi Sea research paper when it was published. Instead, a short announcement was placed on the FWS's Alaska website, in which the encouraging news was downplayed. As a consequence, there was virtually no media coverage.

No one wanted to admit that their models were wrong, especially Steve Amstrup, formerly head polar bear biologist at USGS, now chief spokesperson for Polar Bears International, an activist nongovernmental organization. It was Amstrup whose "expert opinion" formed the basis of the polar-bears-are-doomed computer model which gave polar bears their threatened status.

Even independent evidence suggested the computer models were wrong. A recent genetic study looked at both modern and ancient DNA of polar bears. It indicated that polar bears survived the last interglacial period (115,000-130,000 years ago), when it was much warmer than today, with only a moderate population decline. Even though there was no summer sea ice and much less winter ice in the Arctic at that time, the bears faired quite well.

Amping up the scare stories

Despite all this good news, the fear-mongering hasn't stopped. In a recent drive for cash donations, the Center for Biological Diversity bizarrely asserted: "Global warming is killing polar bears. As their sea-ice habitat disappears, bears are drowning, starving to death, and in some desperate cases, even eating each other." However, apart from the Svalbard bear which died of old age (not climate change), there have been no reports of starving bears anywhere since 2006, not a single report of a drowning polar bear since 2004, and no more reports of increased cannibalism in the two supposedly most vulnerable populations (Southern Beaufort Sea and Western Hudson Bay) since 2009.

We are, however, still getting doomsday reports from a few polar bear researchers in Canada. Western Hudson Bay females and cubs, they say, are not surviving as well as they did 20 to 30 years ago. But there are no published reports or papers to back up these claims, not even interim reports. If there are hard facts to support these assertions, why have they not been published?

It seems we can now add withholding research results to withholding good news as examples of polar bear researchers desperately trying to keep the polar-bears-are-doomed argument going. Despite these efforts, the facts are coming out—the "message" that polar bears are already dying from global warming is now known to be false. The biggest threat to polar bears is still reckless overhunting. ■

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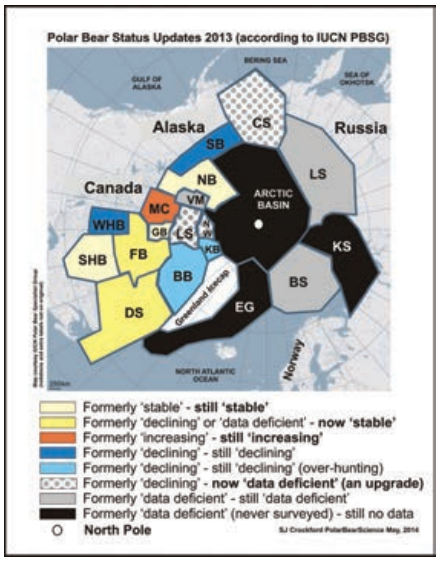
Good News About Polar Bear Numbers

There is still no accurate total but what we do know is encouraging.
By Susan Crockford, Ph.D.

For the first time in 20 years, no formal global population estimate was provided by the PBSG. There are numbers for each subpopulation estimate but you have to add up the columns yourself. This yields an estimate of 13,071 to 24,238, based on 14 of the 19 subpopulations. Therefore the worldwide total is substantially larger than these estimates, with five subpopulations not yet counted (CS, EG, KS, LS and Arctic Basin, shown on map).

Two subpopulations—Foxe Basin (FB) and Davis Strait (DS)—were upgraded from "declining" or "data deficient" in the last status report (2009) to "stable."

Three subpopulations—Southern Hudson Bay (SHB), Northern Beaufort Sea (NB) and Gulf of Boothia in the central Canadian Arctic—are stable (as they have been for the last 20 years or so). Note that SHB is further south than Western Hudson Bay (WHB). One subpopulation, M'Clintock Channel (MC), is still "increasing."



Three subpopulations—Chukchi Sea (CS), Norwegian Bay (NW) and Lancaster Sound (LS)—have been upgraded from "declining" to "data deficient," reflecting signs of population health but out-of-date population counts.

Three subpopulations—Barents Sea (BS), Laptev Sea (LS, Russia) and Viscount Melville Sound (MV)—are still data deficient due to out-of-date or nonexistent population counts.

Three subpopulations—East Greenland (EG), Kara Sea (KS), and the Arctic Basin—have never been assessed and remain, as ever, "data deficient."

Two subpopulations—Baffin Bay (BB) and adjacent Kane Basin (KB)—are still listed as "declining" due to suspected overhunting.

Two subpopulations—Southern Beaufort (SB) and Western Hudson Bay (WHB)—are still listed as "declining."

For SB, the 2009 assessment of "declining" was based on a nonstatistically significant drop at the last population count (2004-2006), which the PBSG admitted used flawed methodology. A joint FWS/USGS population survey of SB (2008-2013) has just been completed, with results expected later this year.

WHB registered a 22 percent drop in numbers between 1998 and 2004, and while major future declines were predicted by PBSG biologists, a recent (2011) survey showed no decline since 2004 and no reports supporting the claims of reduced survival of females and cubs have been published. ■

For more information, check www.pbsg.npolar.no/en/status.