

Help Protect the Polar Bears*

By Jessica Beebe

Polar bears are powerful creatures. They are born blind and deaf. They have enormous strength and weigh between 1,000 - 1,400 pounds. They are extremely agile and can run, surprisingly, at an incredibly high speed. The polar bear is the most powerful four-footed swimmer on the planet. They can smell a seal on ice 20 miles away with their powerful noses. They are the tallest species of bear and can be up to 10 feet tall when they stand on their hind legs.

Despite all of this, the polar bear population is decreasing progressively. This is due to global warming and human activities (like oil and gas development activities) occurring in their habitat. The Arctic sea ice- which polar bears depend on for hunting and shelter- is melting under their paws. In some cases, polar bears are stuck in the Arctic Sea, left isolated with no where to go and no ice to climb onto. Although polar bears are notoriously good swimmers that can swim very long distances between ice floes, they are not powerful enough to swim for weeks without a break in order to find solid ice. They are forced to dive down to the sea floor and dig a hole, which they crawl into and die.

This knowledge gets many people to sign petitions or to try to fight global warming in any way possible. You can help by using the washer/dishwasher only when it is full, using less hot water (take a quick shower instead of a long bath), using a clothesline instead of a dryer, recycling paper, cans, and bottles, planting trees, and walking or riding you're your bike when you're traveling short distances instead of polluting the earth by driving your car.

Polar bears are highly dependent on pack ice. Most of their time is spent hunting for food (ringed and bearded seals are their primary source of food, but they also eat walrus, caribou, beached whales, grass, and seaweed), and they can't hunt if there is no ice. As I said, the climate is changing and the ice that the polar bears are so reliant on is thinning. The polar bears are literally starving to death. Some of the bears are attracted by the smell of unsecured garbage and animal carcasses. When they follow this smell, they often run into humans that are out hunting. Fatal attacks on humans are likely to increase as the sea ice shrinks and the hungry polar bears try to search for food on land. Also, polar bears eat at garbage dumps, and some are poisoned by the trash.

Mother polar bears have high nutrition requirements that might not be met if the bears can't get food. The mothers must eat a lot of meat and gain 22 kilograms of fat in order for their cubs to be born healthy. This means that fewer polar bears are coming out of their mother's womb alive. Also, more cubs are being born unhealthy and are dying young. This has led to a major drop in the polar bear population.

Thankfully, the U.S. and Russia are working together to protect polar bears. Their agreement provides long-term programs such as habitat conservation and collection of biological information. Hunting of mother bears and cubs less than a year old is now prohibited. A decision is being made on how many polar bears native tribes can hunt annually. In some cases, biologists place collars on a few polar bears that let them track the bears' movements by satellite and identify their breeding locations. This allows biologists to know where they are so they can better protect them.

People must work together to bring an end to global warming and to keep the Arctic ice from melting. The garbage that is in their habitats is full of pesticides that can poison the bears. The polar bears are important mammals that have always fended for themselves, but now they need our help to stay alive.

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