

Statement of Richard Glenn
To the Committee on Environment and Public Works
United States Senate
On
Examining Threats to and Protections of Polar Bear
January 30, 2008

Madam Chair, Senator Inhofe, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear here today. I appreciate your effort to hear from Alaskan Arctic residents and Alaska's Inupiaq people on these most important issues.

Introduction

My name is Richard Glenn. I am here today as an Alaskan Arctic resident who studies sea ice, a subsistence hunter and whaling crew co-captain, and a geologist. I am also an incorporator and the board President of the Barrow Arctic Science Consortium, which is an organization that fosters the ongoing productive relationship between visiting researchers and local experts within our Native community. I am also a board member and officer of the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation (ASRC), the Alaska Native Regional Corporation for the Native people of Alaska's North Slope. While I wear many hats, I am appearing here today as an Inupiaq resident of Alaska's Arctic.

I have studied sea ice for years, studied it for University-level work and have assisted many others in the sea ice environment, including ice scientists, Navy dive teams, journalists and biologists. We Inupiaq hunters live and hunt on the ice each year, so our lives and safety depend on our knowledge of ever-changing ice conditions.

Ice Conditions and Relation to Polar Bear

I, along with many of our people, am concerned about the changing sea ice conditions that we have experienced in the last few years. We are watching it closely, on a day to day basis, as well as seasonally, to understand what is occurring in our ocean environment, and, most significantly for us, what those changes mean for the resources on which we depend for our way of life.

The most prominent point made by the Fish and Wildlife Service in its proposal to list the polar bear as a threatened species under the ESA is about receding perennial ice pack and its equivalence as a "loss of habitat". It also mentions increased fetches of open water, and its effects on denning and feeding. There is little mention of the marginal ice zone which must grow at the expense of a receding perennial pack. The marginal ice zone is comprised of ice that freezes and melts within a given year, and may contain fragments of older multiyear ice as well as areas of open water.

In addition to hunting at breathing holes and wind-driven lead edges in winter, polar bears thrive in many settings. In waters offshore of Barrow, for example we hunters see polar bears come closer to shore in late spring when the ringed seals give birth to pups beneath stable snowdrifts on landfast sea ice. The bears smell the odor of dens of newborn seal pups beneath snowdrifts.

In summer we observe polar bears hunting in the marginal ice zone. This coincides with the arrival of the walrus herds, and bears hunt them along with seals on and around drifting ice floes. I believe this is where polar bears thrive, because they can catch napping prey on ice floes, or use the floes for cover to catch animals in the water.

Some polar bears will also stay on the coast in the summer months, not trapped there by the absence of ice, but to feed on dead grey whales that have washed ashore, or on walrus and seals basking on the beach.

In autumn and winter some bears continue to feed on the remains of dead animals that have washed ashore. Groups of bears have been seen by our villagers establishing an over-wintering circle around a carcass, such as a grey whale. And yes, as the Fish and Wildlife Service notes, they also feed on the remains of bowhead whales harvested by fall-time whale hunters of the three eastern North Slope villages. Much has been written about the presence of bears around bowhead remains, but it is simply a part of their natural feeding cycle.

None of the above hunting environments is on the multi-year ice “pack”. My point is there is a yearlong and varied cycle of habitat, ice environment, prey animals and food sources for polar bears in our region, including marginal ice zones, shorelines, inland areas, leads, and multi-year ice. As you consider receding ice, it is very important to also consider the other aspects of the polar bear’s habitat---it is wrong to ignore these aspects and focus only on how far the ice has receded in recent summers. To do so, is to ignore polar bear behavior and use of other habitats.

The Fish and Wildlife Service acknowledges that the increase of marginal ice and corresponding reduction of multi-year ice cover may even be beneficial for ice seals and polar bears.

Polar Bear Populations

The proposed listing of the polar bear, is not based on polar bear population levels or trends, but based on the art of modeling. There is not on enough observational data as there should be for a listing. I am concerned that the listing is directed at being used as a legal tool to address climate change issues well away from the Arctic, not as a means to conserve a species.

Polar bears are hard to count. For example, the population of the polar bears of the Chukchi Sea region is estimated to be 2,000, based “on extrapolation of aerial den surveys”, but these surveys are not sufficiently reliable to provide an accurate population

count. Polar bear population researchers do not appear to take into account migrating animals within a population. Scientists have documented bear denning on the pack ice in the central Beaufort Sea and those dens, subsequently, drifting with the pack ice. As just one example, in the span of several months, a den had drifted from the central Beaufort Sea to the Wrangel Island vicinity, offshore of the Russian Far East. The mother and cub(s) emerged from the den there and made a beeline back to the Beaufort. What does this imply? That bears and dens can drift great distances, and that there may be flux between population stocks.

The accuracy of current population counts is a threshold issue in an ESA listing, and should be determined with a greater degree of certainty than that exhibited in the proposed rule.

The proposed rule correlates a decline of multi-year ice cover with a decline in the abundance and distribution of ringed seal, a primary prey of the polar bear. Yet the data used by USFWS is insufficient to support this key conclusion. For example, right now in the Chukchi Sea, the satellites will tell you that our ocean is covered with new, young ice and not the multi-year pack. Nevertheless, our hunters are finding abundant and healthy ringed-seals as well as polar bears.

Existing National and International Regulatory Mechanisms

There are many international mechanisms, laws and commissions set up to conserve and protect the polar bear. Some of these have been strengthened in recent years. In moving to the Endangered Species Act, let us not ignore those groups and activities and laws such as the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The actions that work best in the Arctic are the actions that respect and work with the Native people of the Arctic. Please do not skip over these means and measures to protect polar bear. These actions and forums, several of which have recently been strengthened, have not been thoroughly acknowledged by USFWS in its proposed listing. These actions and forums should be better understood in Congress, and not glossed in focusing on the Endangered Species Act. The ESA is only one means of protecting polar bears, not the only means.

Federal harvest data show that the take of polar bears by Inupiat people is sustainable. Inupiat Eskimos take about 45-50 bears from the Chukchi stock, for example. Yet the same stock is suffering from poaching on the Russian side, with catch numbers thought to be around 200 per year. If we really want to protect the species, let's do something about polar bear poaching by other countries.

Traditional Knowledge and Consultation

Our knowledge is both traditional and scientific as many Inupiaq people are involved in conducting and supporting scientific research on wildlife, sea ice conditions and climate change. Our traditional knowledge is built upon thousands of years of experience with the polar bear and its habitat. We monitor environmental changes closely because they are critical to our subsistence way of life and our culture. I encourage the federal

government, and the Congress, to seek and use the breadth of knowledge and year-round, first hand traditional knowledge held by the Inupiaq people before taking action to list the polar bear as threatened under the ESA. This type of consultation with the most knowledgeable and affected Native people of the region is both common sense and required by law and federal policy.

ESA Listing of Polar Bear as a Means to Affect Climate Change Policies

I believe that a threatened listing for the polar bear will do little to aid the polar bears' existence. It will not create more sea ice cover. It will not change their ability to locate dens or prey. But it will negatively and disproportionately affect the lives of the people, the Inupiat Eskimos, who co-exist with the polar bear in the Alaskan Arctic. Our small, isolated communities will run the risk of becoming included in "Critical Habitat", even though we have no measurable impact on polar bear. What few playgrounds, gravel pits, airstrips, landfills, campsites, hunting areas, and village expansions that we have scattered along Alaska's northern arctic coast may be limited by the subjective process invoked by the Endangered Species Act. While America sleeps better at night, falsely believing they have assisted this iconic species, they will still fly planes, drive cars, and power their homes.

We are very concerned about changes in climate conditions in the Arctic and have more reason than others to be aggressive about addressing climate change; however, the proper methods to address those issues are to deal with climate change conditions and causes directly, not to twist the ESA listing of the polar bear into an action directed at climate change.

Conclusion

Madam Chair, the Arctic is a beautiful, and yes, changing environment. It has been the home of the Inupiat for thousands of years. We appreciate the effort that you and Senator Inhofe have made to hear the concerns from those of us that have the most experience with the Arctic's unique climate, which is home to our people and the polar bear.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or the members of the Committee may have.