



Protecting Polar Bears

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Foreword

By Kevin Foster MP

The polar bear is an iconic species and an important part of our natural history. Since it was defined as a distinct species in 1774 it has captured the imagination of children, explorers and ecologists alike and recently its decline has been well-documented by climate scientists.

As a nation that leads the way in conservation, it is our duty to do what we can to protect the polar bear. As a Conservative Government, our commitment to the species was explicitly stated in our General Election Manifesto, and it is important that we follow this commitment through to the best of our abilities. Given the sharp decline in polar bear numbers and the ongoing threats to its survival, we should seek to reclassify the species as from 'vulnerable' to 'endangered' and help to ban the international trade in its skin.

Being Conservative is synonymous with assisting and reinforcing conservation of individual species, habitats and entire ecosystems. This paper outlines the necessity for one species, but it should also be a metaphor for other animals, whose existence is threatened by human invention and ignorance, whether it's in the polar regions, tropical rainforests, grassy savannahs, migration routes or in Britain itself.



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Implementing the Manifesto Commitment to Save a Species

The 2015 Conservative Manifesto committed the incoming Government to press for full 'endangered species' status for polar bears, and a ban on the international trade in polar bear skins.

This was the first and only time these commitments have appeared in a major UK party's election manifesto.

The polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*) is the largest bear, and the largest land predator on Earth. The Polar Bear Specialist Group, of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), calculates its current worldwide population as between 20,000 and 25,000¹, with around 15,500 of these in Canada². However, the plight of polar bears is now so serious that it could threaten the long term survival of the species, which is predicted to decline by two-thirds over the next twenty years. The IUCN categorises polar bears as “at risk of extinction in the wild”³ with a population that is officially defined as “decreasing”⁴.

The pledges made in the Conservative Party manifesto were a logical extension to the 2010-2015 Coalition Government’s international leadership role on the issue of illegal wildlife trade, including hosting the London Summit in 2014 (see Bow Group Briefing ‘International Wildlife Conservation’, Dec 2014).

The Need for Protection Under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)

U. maritimus has been listed under Appendix II of CITES since 1975, meaning that special permits are required for the export or import of live polar bears or products, such as the skins in this case, from dead animals. It has also been the subject of bilateral⁵ and Arctic-wide international agreements⁶.

Hunting is only permitted by aboriginal peoples in Canada, Russia, Denmark (Greenland) and the USA (Alaska), all of which are signatories to CITES. The major threats posed by hunting to the future of the polar bear occur in Canada,

where multiple Inuit and First Nations have varying degrees of authority over, and governance for, polar bears through land claims and self-government. Quotas are established based on best available science and traditional ecological knowledge through a land claims decision-making process.

The Polar Bear Specialist Group estimates that up to 663 polar bears are killed annually in Canada, compared to 65 in Alaska⁷. In Canada, indigenous hunters may sell their hunting tag to a sport/trophy hunter, who must hunt the bear using traditional means (dog teams). This compares to Russia, where the sale of animals hunted by aboriginal people is forbidden.

About 300 bears from the Canadian population enter international trade annually⁸. Up-listing polar bears to Appendix I would increase the animal's protection and would ban the trade in polar bears and their body parts other than in exceptional circumstances. Appendix I includes species under threat of extinction, and that is the case that our Government needs to put forward in international forums.

Polar bears have always been hunted for their hides and for food by native people in the Arctic. Such indigenous, subsistence hunting would not be affected by the up-listing.⁹

The Need to Ban the International Trade in Polar Bear Skins

One of the most immediate threats to polar bears is that of illegal hunting. There is a strong demand for polar bear skins; for instance in Russia alone, 100 to 200 polar bears are killed every year for this trade, according to the IUCN.

Demand for polar bear skins from China and Russia in particular has led to an increase in the price and thus an increase in hunting. This could lead to irreparable loss for polar bear populations. The profits are so high that the black market trade thrives. Ending the legal trade would remove any cover for this illegal trade.

Canada currently supplies nearly all of the polar bear skins and parts currently in international commercial trade. Not all Canadian jurisdictions where polar bear hunting occurs have set hunting quotas. There are currently no quotas – and therefore no established limit – for polar bear hunting in Quebec, where hunting of the Southern Beaufort Sea polar bear skyrocketed from approximately 36 bears in 2008 to 106 bears in 2011, reportedly due to increased pelt prices¹⁰. The number of polar bears killed annually in Canada is growing. According to Canada's Polar Bear Technical Committee (PBTC), the number of polar bears killed in 2012/2013 greatly exceeded the average number killed per year over the previous five-year period. Specifically, during the 2012/2013 hunting season, 740 polar bears were killed, exceeding the five-year mean annual number killed between 2008 and 2012 (663 bears) by 11.6 percent¹¹. Rising sale prices for polar bear skins at Canada's fur auctions may explain the recent increase in polar bears killed in Canada. In 2012, polar bear hides at Fur Harvesters Auction Inc. in Canada sold for more than triple the prices obtained in 2007¹².

Further Threats to the Polar Bear's Future

Hunting is not the only threat to the future of *U. maritimus*. The species also suffers from habitat shrinkage, due to oil and gas exploration and development and pollution from oil spills and other contamination of the sea.

Climate change is a major factor also, as rising temperatures and the subsequent loss of sea ice drive polar bears inland before they have built up sufficient fat reserves to survive the summer months, leading to malnutrition and starvation. Furthermore, reproductive rates are reduced, suitable maternity dens are less common and less insulating, and since food sources are scarcer, the animals are more likely to seek food in human settlements.

The Next Steps

The Government should implement its manifesto commitments to protect polar bears by:

Supporting a future up-listing of polar bears to CITES Appendix I status;

Taking a lead on the world stage to benefit a common position on this, with the EU and others, before the next CITES Conference of the Parties;

In the meantime, encouraging steps towards an international trade ban in polar bears and their products.

Long-term, ecotourism can provide a sustainable economic alternative to killing these animals, just as whale watching has replaced the commercial killing of whales in most countries.

We are on the verge of losing one of the world's most important and iconic species. If ever there was a time to act, it is now.

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Cover image: "A polar bear keeps close to her young along the Beaufort Sea coast in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska".
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