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WWF POSITION STATEMENT

15th MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES TO CITES, DOHA, QATAR, 13 – 25 March 2010

Proposal 3: Polar bear (Ursus maritimus)

The United States of America has proposed to transfer the polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*) from Appendix II to Appendix I.

WWF position: OPPOSE

Rationale:

WWF is unable to support the transfer of polar bear, (*Ursus maritimus*) from CITES Appendix II to Appendix I for the following reasons:

- WWF supports the principle that, having adopted criteria for listing species on Appendices I and II, the CITES Parties should adhere to them. Not to do so would be to jeopardize the listing of those species that clearly do meet the criteria, and are in urgent need of listing.
- The polar bear does not meet any of the biological criteria for inclusion in Appendix I as established in Annex 5 to *Resolution Conf. 9.24 (rev CoP14)*. An estimated 20,000–25,000 polar bears currently range through Canada, Greenland, Norway, Russia and the US. The global population of polar bears is therefore not small and furthermore, the global population has not undergone a marked decline in the recent past and the species' area of distribution is not restricted.
- The main threat to polar bears is the retreat of sea-ice habitat driven by global climate change, with the predicted future rate of population decline due to climate change estimated to be approximately 30% over the next 45–50 years. Even if this decline projection proves to be an under-estimate, CITES criteria are based on consideration of past declines and not projections far into the future. At CoP 13, Parties voted to remove from the criteria a provision whereby a species could be listed on Appendix I if it was thought likely to meet the criteria within five years. The rationale for this decision was that such a provision was unnecessary, since the CoP meets approximately every three years. It would, therefore, be incongruous if Parties were to include the polar bear on Appendix I on the basis of a population decline that is predicted to take place over a 50-year period into the future.
- Trade is not a significant threat to the species. Canada is the only country that currently allows commercial exports of polar bear parts and products — all of which result from quotas provided for Aboriginal subsistence hunting. Since the 1990s, approximately 300 Canadian polar bears (2% of the population) enter international trade annually.
- Whilst international transactions of scientific specimens of polar bears and some personal possessions have increased since the 1990s, commercial trade has not increased. Trends in trade are not indicative of harvest levels.
- An Appendix I listing would be unlikely to reduce the number of bears hunted in any range State.
- There are a small number of polar bear populations in Canada where harvest may be unsustainable. Exports of polar bear parts from these populations are already set at

zero, or very low, and therefore an Appendix I listing is extremely unlikely to improve the situation. Rather than listing the species on CITES Appendix I, WWF supports the continued listing of polar bears on CITES Appendix II, and urges the Government of Canada and appropriate regional authorities to take domestic measures to ensure harvest of these populations is reduced to sustainable levels.

- The main threat to polar bears is the retreat of sea-ice habitat driven by global climate change. Additional threats to the species include industrial development (such as offshore oil and gas, shipping, and mining), toxic pollution and conflict with humans.
- This proposal has raised the important issue of the impact of climate change on species listed on the CITES Appendices. WWF believes this should be addressed through the establishment of a joint working group of the Animals Committee and the Plants Committee, which would consider the implications of climate change for the operations of the Convention, and report on its findings to CoP16.

Further recommendations:

WWF urges all CITES Parties, particularly those with an interest in polar bears and their conservation, to urgently make deep and long-term cuts to greenhouse gas emissions in order to ensure global temperatures are kept well below an average increase of 2° C above pre-industrial levels.

Background:

Biological characteristics

The polar bear is the world's largest bear species and the largest land predator. There is a significant difference in size between male and female polar bears, with the males (350-800 kg) weighing more than twice as much as the females (150-300 kg). Body weight also varies considerably during the season – especially for female bears, which can often double in weight between early spring and late summer when pregnant. Compared to other bear species, the polar bear has a relatively long and narrow head, smaller and shorter fur-covered ears, and shorter, sharper claws. Its long canine teeth and sharp molars have helped polar bears adapt to their almost exclusively carnivorous lifestyle.

Population status

Due to its long lifespan and low reproductive rate, the polar bear is vulnerable to overexploitation. Intensive sport hunting in the 1960's and 1970's led to serious declines in polar bear populations throughout the Arctic. Concerns about the hunt and the methods used at the time ultimately resulted in the founding of the Polar Bear Specialist Group (PBSG) and the signing of the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears by all range States. The range States agreed to prohibit random, unregulated sport hunting of polar bears and to outlaw hunting the bears from aircraft and icebreakers as had been common practice. Compared to the situation in the 1960s and 1970s, polar bear harvest management is vastly improved¹.

Satisfactory monitoring information has been delivered for 13 of the 19 currently recognized polar bear sub-populations in recent years. While updated full population censuses are not available for all regions, valuable research data on population health parameters indicative of overall population health (such as survival, body condition, and recruitment) can also be considered, since these are widely accepted measures of the overall health and trends in wildlife populations.

Of these 19 subpopulations, three appear to be exhibiting fairly stable numbers, one is likely increasing (recovering from past over-hunting), eight are considered declining or showing significant signs of ecological stress related to habitat loss and changes in timing of sea ice, and

¹ IUCN/SSC Polar Bear Specialist Group. Polar bear hunting, harvesting and over-harvesting. <http://pbsg.npolar.no/en/issues/threats/over-harvest.html> Viewed 27 January 2010.

the remaining seven have insufficient data on which to base a status assessment at this time.² WWF therefore fully supports the continued listing of polar bears on CITES Appendix II.

Role in the ecosystem

The polar bear is a formidable predator and sits at the top of the arctic food chain. Its most common prey is the ringed seal (*Phoca hispida*), Greenland seal (*Phoca groenlandica*) and bearded seal (*Erignathus barbatus*). However, the polar bear will eat other prey when presented with the opportunity. Juveniles of walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*), hooded seal (*Cystophora cristata*), beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*) and narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*) as well as carrion of any marine and terrestrial mammals may also be included in their diet, though are not thought to be significant additions. Man and other polar bears are considered the only predators of polar bears. As with most top predators, a significant decline or removal of polar bears would be likely to have cascading effects on the arctic ecosystems in which they occur.

International trade

Polar bears are valued as a subsistence resource for arctic communities. The hunting of polar bears for subsistence purposes also provides economic benefits to the community through the sale of goods from the hunt (e.g., hides, skulls, bones, teeth, claws). Skulls, claws and teeth are often sold as curios or made into handicrafts. The hide is either sold whole (e.g., as a rug) or in pieces which can also be used for the making of handicrafts. However, the value of a subsistence hunt cannot be determined solely by the monetary value of the skins or claws, as this does not take into account other aspects of the hunt such as providing food to the community and the cultural importance of the hunt itself.³

In Canada, the majority of trade in polar bear parts is in skins and rugs, skulls, and claws; however there is also some trade in teeth, bones, and pieces of fur used in fishing. Approximately 100 polar bear hides are sold on the open market every year. Most of these are from Nunavut, where the meat from the bear stays in the community, while the hide is auctioned. The majority of these hides are exported out of Canada. In the US, trade consists of handicrafts only, as trade in skins or rugs to non-natives is not permitted under US law⁴. In Greenland, the most valuable item from the hunt is the hide, which is used for traditional clothing or is traded. The value of other items (claws, teeth, skull, bones) varies and depends on the items or what type of handicraft they are made into⁵. In 2008, the Greenland Home Rule introduced a ban on the export of all polar bear parts or derivatives originating from Greenland. Until this ban is lifted, polar bear parts and derivatives cannot be exported out of Greenland⁶; however this ban does not affect trade within the country.

Norway and Russia do not permit the hunting of polar bears. However once the Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Russian Federation on the Conservation and Management of the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population enters into force, Russia will be legally permitted to harvest polar bears on a subsistence basis if sustainable take is deemed possible⁷. The agreement was signed in 2000, and ratified in 2007.

² IUCN/PBSG (2009) 15th meeting PBSG in Copenhagen, Denmark 2009. *Press Release*.

³ Freeman, M.M.R. and Wenzel, G.W. (2006) The nature and significance conservation hunting in Canadian Arctic. *Arctic* 59(1):21-30.

⁴ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2001) Hunting and use of polar bear by Alaska Natives. USFWS Factsheet.

⁵ GRØNLANDS NATURINSTITUT (2007) Standing non-detriment findings for exports from Greenland of products derived from polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*). Letter to the Ministry of Environment and Nature.

⁶ Greenland Home Rule (2008) Ministry of Environment and Nature. CITES Rules for Tourists. <http://dk.nanog.gl/Emner/Om%20Groenland/Turist/CITES/~media/C5E82EE556AA4502BCEED4EF381F65D8.ashx>, viewed 23 September 2008.

⁷ US Fish and Wildlife Service (2007) US/Russia Polar Bear Treaty enacted. *Press Release*.

The first meeting of the Bilateral Commission was held in late 2009. Commercial trade in polar bear parts and derivatives originating from Norway (Svalbard) or Russia remain prohibited.

In the US, polar bear parts and derivatives cannot be exported out of the country unless the item is approved as a pre-act or pre-convention item (predates the US Government Marine Mammal Protection Act and the CITES Appendix II listing).

Trophy hunting

Canada has uniquely recognized the Aboriginal right to transfer hunting rights for polar bears to others. As a result, Aboriginal people in Canada hold the right to conduct limited sport hunts for this species, which bring in significantly more revenue to the community than utilising the bear for subsistence purposes.

The import and export of hunting trophies is not normally considered commercial trade. Therefore a CITES Appendix I listing would not prevent the export of polar bear hunting trophies from any polar bear range State as long as the permitting requirements were met.

Illegal or unsustainable trade

Information of seizures of illegal trade is not always publicly available. Illegal hunting of polar bears in the Russian Arctic during the 1990s was mainly for food; however the demand for polar bear products (mainly skins) in recent years has grown and the hunt has become more commercially organised. Although polar bears are fully protected in Russia, skins and other parts are traded illegally mainly within in Russia and also exported to other ex-USSR countries illegally⁸.

The main driver of poaching is the demand for skins, which are valued as wall hangings and covers in Russia and other CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries, and are often considered a status symbol among specific socioeconomic groups, such as the "nouveau riches."^{7,9}

Illegal activities are extremely difficult to document with their monitoring often requiring covert operations with government authorities over a period of time. Therefore it is difficult to determine the exact volume of illegal trade in polar bears.

Current management regimes

In 1973, the five nations with polar bear populations finalized the *Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears and Their Habitats*. The Agreement came into force in May 1976 and all five contracting parties unanimously reaffirmed continuation of the Agreement in January 1981.

Under this international agreement, the five polar bear nations are committed to:

1. Protecting polar bear habitat, especially denning areas, feeding areas, and migratory routes
2. Banning the hunt of bears from aircraft and large motorized boats
3. Conducting and coordinating management and research efforts
4. Exchanging research results and data
5. Managing shared populations in accordance with sound conservation practices and the best available scientific information.

<http://www.fws.gov/news/NewsReleases/showNews.cfm?newsId=38AFE641-927B-89AC-016B93A8F1F06F2C>. Accessed 26 September 2008.

⁸ Anon (2007) Polar bear hides rise in price in the back market. Polar Bear Patrol News. *UMKY Patrol News* No. 2, 2007.

⁹ Vaisman, A.L., Lyapustin, S.N., Kushnirenko, A.V., Reutskaya, S.A. and Fomenko, P.V. (2006) Bears of the northern Far East of Russia: a short guide for customs officers. Moscow and Vladivostok, WWF-Russia

The Agreement allows for the taking of polar bears for scientific purposes, for preventing serious disturbances to polar bear habitat through the management of other resources, for use by local people using traditional methods and exercising traditional rights, and for protection of life and property. Though the Agreement itself is not enforceable by law in any of the signatory countries, most of its requirements have been partially or fully addressed by the passage of domestic legislation. As such, the Agreement has been an important influence on the development of internationally coordinated management and research programmes that have ensured the survival of polar bears. In Norway, the Agreement resulted in the closure of all polar bear harvest. The Agreement influenced the signatory countries to try to manage the harvest of polar bears within sustainable limits while still facilitating harvest by local people.¹⁰

Beyond the Agreement, each of the five polar bear range States has established its own regulatory framework and conservation practices for the species with varying degrees of investment and success. In some areas, polar bear populations are shared by more than one jurisdiction and, in those cases, Article VII of the Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears calls for the Contracting Parties to coordinate polar bear research, consult with each other, and exchange information on research and management programmes, research results and data. It is critical that shared populations are managed cooperatively by those jurisdictions that share them and it is critical that an effective circumpolar conservation plan is established, following the clear intent of the Agreement, and adopted by all range States.

Role of CITES

CITES embraces the principle of sustainable use and does not have the aim of restricting international trade unless this is necessary to ensure a species' survival. CITES Appendix I is intended to include species threatened with extinction and as a last resort when the species is so depleted that any international commercial trade in wild-taken specimens would pose a risk. Less than 3% of the 33,000 species whose trade is regulated by the Convention are listed on Appendix I. This is because the criteria are quite strict, requiring the population either to be very small or highly fragmented (to the point where its survival is at risk) or to be undergoing precipitous declines.

WWF fully supports the use of CITES Appendix I where it is necessary. However, there are also valid conservation reasons why a decision to list a species on Appendix I should not be taken lightly.

Most importantly, WWF supports the principle that, having adopted criteria for listing species on Appendices I and II, the CITES Parties should adhere to them. Not to do so would be to jeopardise the listing of those species that clearly do meet the criteria, and are in urgent need of listing. The current status of polar bears does not warrant their inclusion in CITES Appendix I, according to the criteria set out in *Annex 5 to Resolution Conf. 9.24 (rev CoP14)*.

However, the projected impacts of climate change are likely to impact the conservation status of many species listed on the CITES Appendices and consequently the level of harvest that can be considered non-detrimental. As such, climate change and its predicted impacts are of relevance to the CITES Convention. WWF therefore recommends that the CITES Parties establish a joint working group of the Animals Committee and the Plants Committee which would consider the implications of climate change for the operations of the Convention, and report its findings to CoP16. WWF commends the Government of the United States of America for raising the issue of climate change within the CITES framework, and looks forward to the US taking a leading role within the above-noted process.

¹⁰ Prestrud, P. and I. Stirling. (1994) The international agreement and current status of polar bear conservation. *Aquatic Mammals* 20:113-124.

Conservation requirements of polar bears

WWF recognizes that threats to polar bears will occur at different rates and times across their range and that management action will need to be adaptive. Pressures on polar bear populations in addition to climate change include industrial development (such as offshore oil and gas, shipping, and mining), toxic pollution, and conflict with humans.

WWF believes these key challenges should be addressed through the following:

- Improve implementation of existing bi- and multi-lateral agreements on polar bear conservation, and develop new agreements where necessary
- Reduce or eliminate polar bear-human conflict and unnecessary take
- Increase resilience through the protection of critical shore-based summer resting and winter denning habitat
- Mitigate direct threats from industrial activity in critical habitat such as oil and gas development and arctic shipping
- Given the current and projected loss of habitat, protect regions anticipated to be important to polar bears and other ice dependent wildlife in the future
- Eliminate the markets and mechanisms for illegal trade.

Conclusion:

Polar bear do not currently meet the criteria for inclusion in CITES Appendix I, and trade is not currently a significant threat to this species. Therefore WWF is unable to support the proposal to transfer the polar bear from Appendix II to Appendix I.