



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Polar Bear Critical Habitat

Some Frequently Asked Questions



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A curious polar bear out on the ice pack.

What was the recent announcement regarding the designation of critical habitat for polar bear?

In 2010, the Service designated critical habitat for the polar bear through a formal rule making process. The designation was set aside in 2013 as a result of legal challenges brought forward by several groups. That action was recently reversed by the courts and the original designation has been reinstated.

What is critical habitat?

Critical habitat under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is the geographic area that contains habitat features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations or protections. Section 7 of the ESA requires federal agencies to ensure that the activities they authorize, fund or carry out are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of a species or to destroy or adversely modify its critical habitat.

Critical habitat does not create a preserve or refuge; it has no specific regulatory impact beyond a determination of whether an action involving federal agency funds, authorization or permits may destroy or adversely modify the area.

Who is affected by the recent ruling regarding polar bear critical habitat?

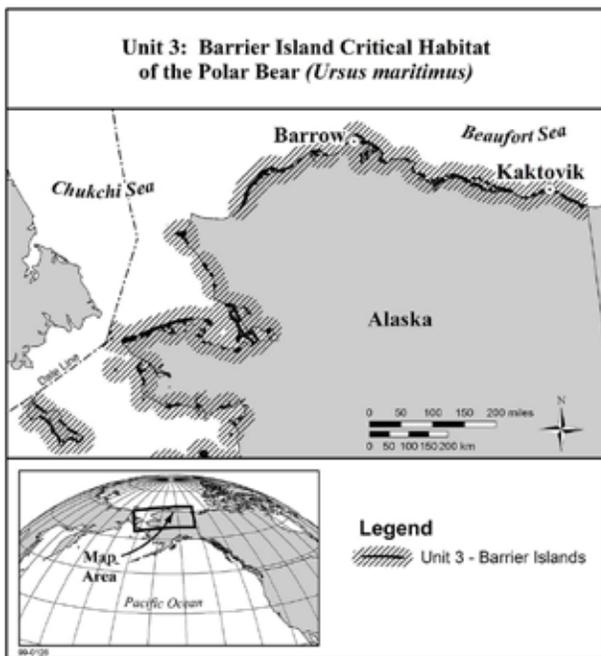
Federal agencies are required to consult with the Service on actions they carry out, fund or authorize that might affect critical habitat. Non-federal entities, including private landowners, will only be affected where a federal nexus exists that involves federal funding, permitting or authorization. Thus, activities conducted by a landowner or operator of a business not involving federal funding, permitting or authorization would not be affected.

What areas are being designated as critical habitat?

Designated critical habitat includes three units: barrier islands, sea ice and terrestrial denning habitat. The total area designated covers 484,734 sq km (187,157 sq mi), with approximately 96 percent of the critical habitat area being sea ice.

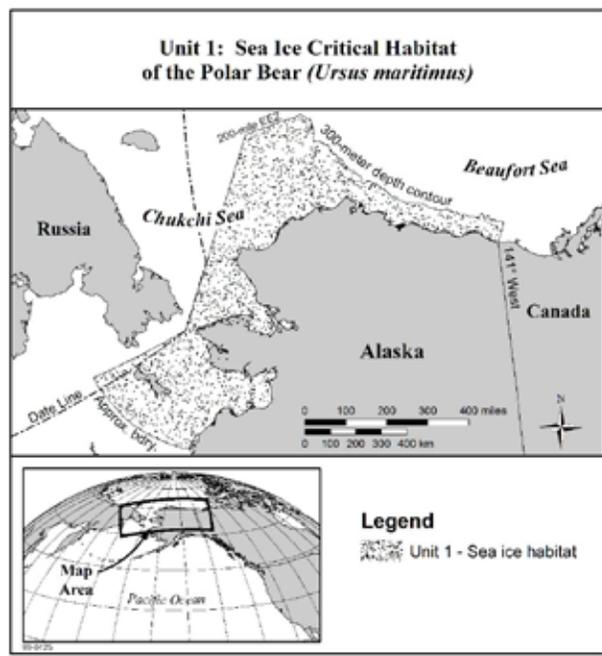
Where can I get more information about the critical habitat designation?

For more information, including detailed maps and GIS Shape files, see the Service's Marine Mammals Web-page at: <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/polarbear/criticalhabitat.htm>



Barrier Island Habitat

This area includes coastal barrier islands and spits along Alaska's coast. Barrier island habitat is used by polar bears for denning, refuge from human disturbances, access to maternal dens and feeding habitat, and travel along the coast.



Sea Ice Habitat

This area located over the continental shelf includes water 300m and less in depth. Sea ice habitat is essential to most polar bear activities. Polar bears evolved over thousands of years to life in a sea ice environment. They depend on the sea ice-dominated ecosystem to support essential life functions. It provides a platform for hunting and feeding, for seeking mates and breeding, for movement to terrestrial maternity denning areas, for resting, and for long-distance movements.

Terrestrial Denning Habitat

This area includes lands within 32 km of the northern coast of Alaska between the U.S. Canadian border and the Kavik River and within 8 km between the Kavik River and Barrow. Appropriate terrestrial denning habitat typically occurs near the coast which allows females to prey on seals, so that they can meet their nutritional needs before and after denning. Adult females also select locations that will provide an environment safe from predatory adult males, disturbance, and adverse weather conditions; all risks to which cubs are particularly vulnerable.

