



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.*

On May 15, 2008, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife (Service) published a Final Rule in the Federal Register listing the polar bear as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The ESA generally requires that the Secretary of Interior designate critical habitat at the time a species is listed. However, when the polar bear was listed as a threatened species in 2008, the Service determined that additional time was needed to conduct a thorough evaluation and peer review of a potential critical habitat designation. Based on this thorough review the Service published a proposed designation on October 29, 2009.

### **What is critical habitat?**

Critical habitat is an area that contains habitat features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations. A critical habitat designation does not set up a preserve or refuge. Federal agencies that undertake, fund, or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure that such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat. Non-federal entities, including private landowners, will only be affected when a federal nexus exists. A federal nexus generally requires either federal funding, permitting, or authorization.

### **Does the proposed critical habitat include areas where oil and gas development activities occur?**

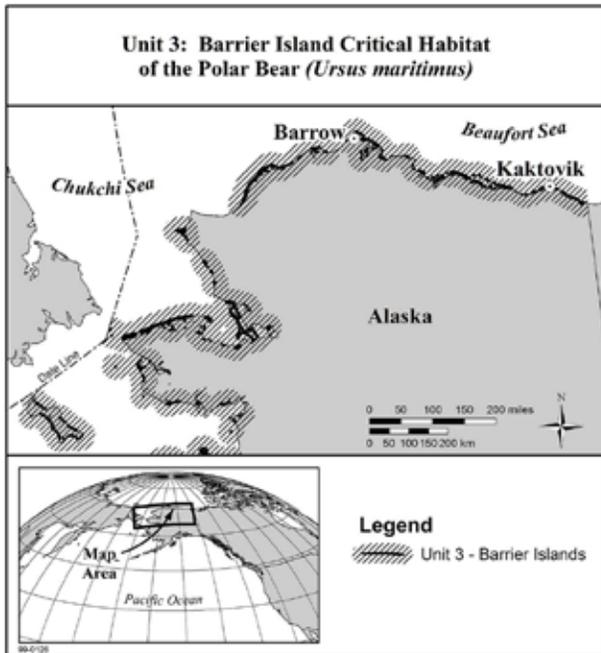
Yes. These activities are already being conducted in areas proposed for designation of critical habitat for polar bears. Oil and gas activities are currently subject to the provisions of both the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which already provide significant protections for the polar bear.

### **What areas are being proposed as critical habitat?**

The proposal would designate three critical habitat areas or units: barrier islands, sea ice, and terrestrial denning habitat. The total area proposed as critical habitat would cover approximately 187,166 square miles of lands and waters within the United States.

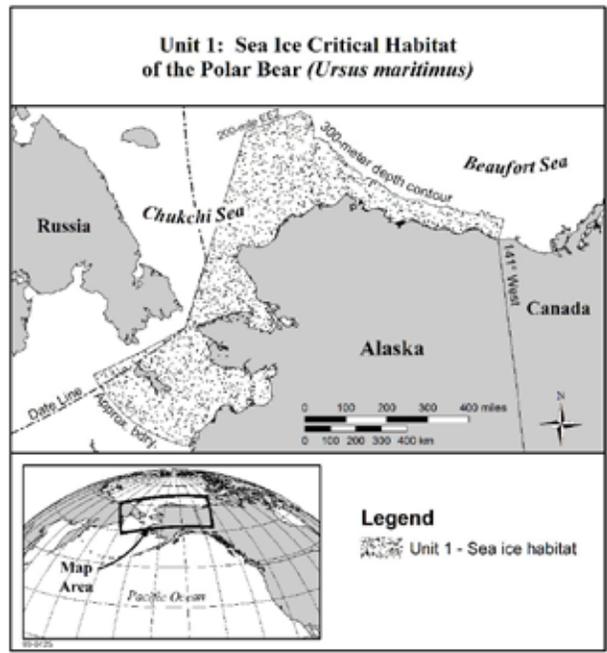
### **Where can I get more information about the critical habitat proposal?**

For more information, including detailed maps, see the proposed rule 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.

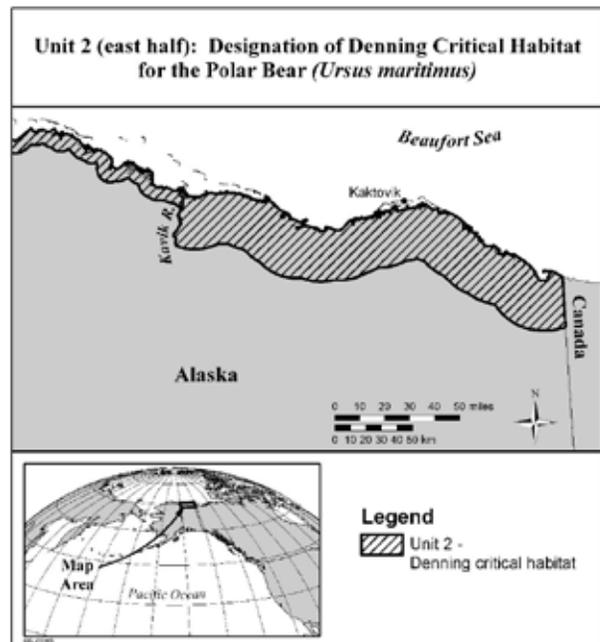


**Sea Ice Habitat**

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.



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