



# Polar Bear Critical Habitat

## *Some Frequently Asked Questions*

### **What has occurred leading up to designation of critical habitat for the polar bear?**

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, range wide, under the Endangered Species Act. The Service proposed designation of critical habitat for the polar bear on October 29, 2009, opening a 60-day comment period. On May 5, 2010, the Service published another notice in the Federal Register opening another 60 day comment period on the Draft Economic Analysis for the proposed designation of critical habitat, and, in response to requests from the public, held two public hearings, one in Barrow, Alaska, and one in Anchorage, Alaska. The Final Rule designating critical habitat for the polar bear will be delivered to the Federal Register on or before November 23, 2010.



Mike Lockhart/USFWS

*A curious polar bear out on the ice of the Beaufort Sea.*

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

Yes. These activities are already being conducted in areas designated as 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 designated as critical habitat?**

There are three critical habitat areas or units designated: barrier islands, sea ice, and terrestrial denning habitat. The total area covers approximately designates approximately 484,734 sq km (187,157 sq mi) of lands and waters within the United States.

### **What changes were made to the critical habitat areas based**

### **on comments received during the public comment period and publication of the Final Rule?**

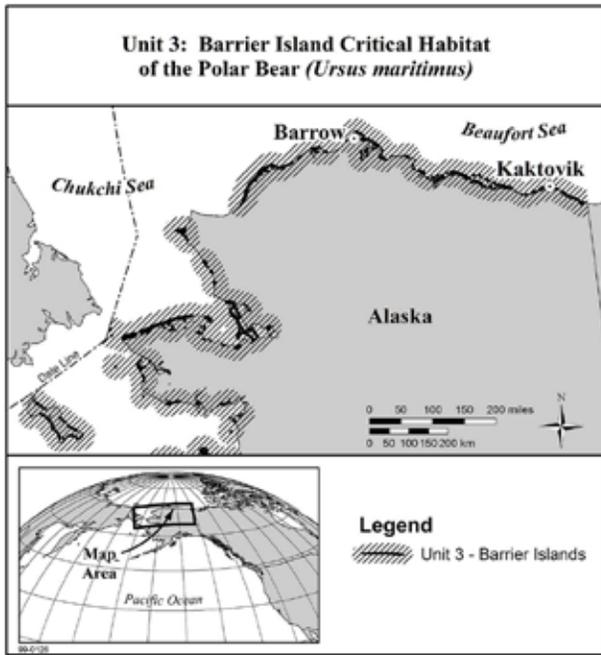
On October 29, 2009, the Service proposed a total critical habitat designation of approximately 519,403 sq km (200,541 sq mi), entirely within the lands and waters of the United States. However, the Service incorrectly identified the extent of the U.S. territorial waters in its proposal. The final critical habitat designation corrects this error to accurately reflect the U.S. boundary for proposed sea ice habitat.

In addition, the critical habitat included in the final rule differs from that originally proposed in several significant areas: 1) five U.S. Air Force (USAF) Radar Sites are exempt from the final rule based on their Integrated Natural Resource Management Plans, which include measures to protect polar bears occurring in habitats within or adjacent to these facilities; 2) the Native communities of Barrow and Kaktovik were excluded from the final designation; 3) all existing manmade structures (regardless of land ownership status) are not included in the final critical habitat designation.

As a result of these changes, the final rule designates approximately 484,734 sq km (187,157 sq mi) as critical habitat.

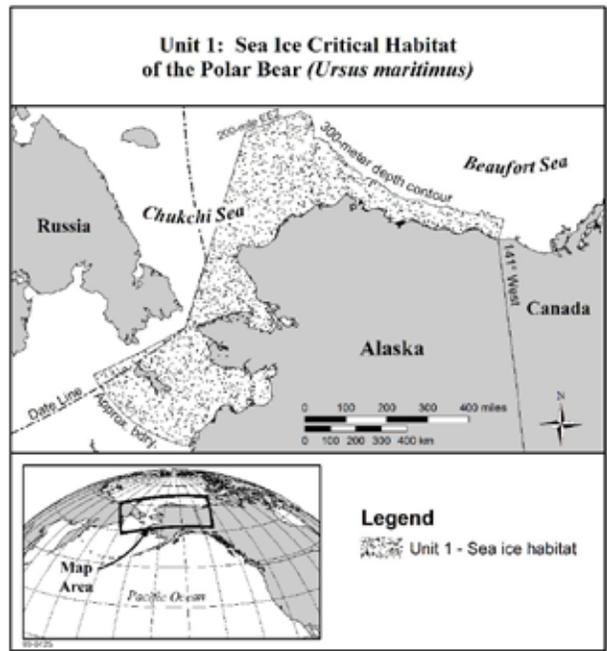
### **Where can I get more information about the critical habitat designation?**

For more information, including detailed maps visit <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.

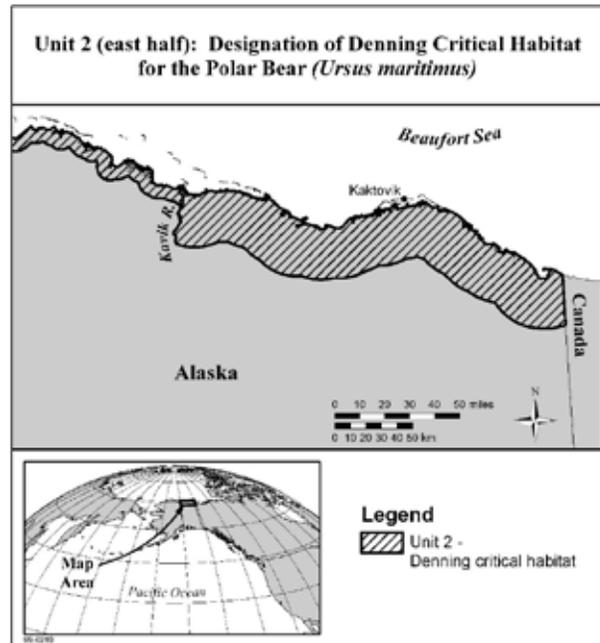
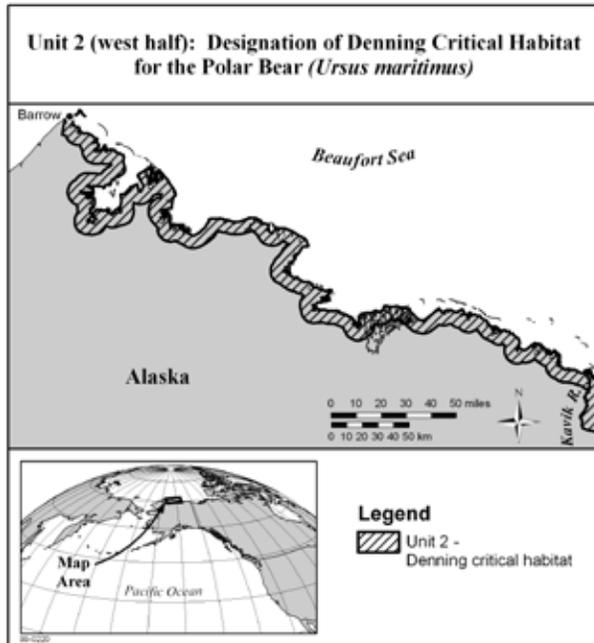


**Sea Ice Habitat**

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.



November 2010

<http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/polarbear/criticalhabitat.htm>