



OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
**U.S. Department
of the Interior**

www.doi.gov

News Release

Date: November 24, 2010

Contact: Bruce Woods, FWS (907) 786-3695

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Announces Final Designation of Polar Bear Critical Habitat

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Department of the Interior’s U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today designated more than 187,000 square miles of on-shore barrier islands, denning areas and offshore sea-ice as critical habitat for the threatened polar bear under the Endangered Species Act.

The designation identifies geographic areas containing features considered essential for the conservation of the bear that require special management or protection.

“This critical habitat designation enables us to work with federal partners to ensure their actions within its boundaries do not harm polar bear populations,” said Tom Strickland, Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. “Nevertheless, the greatest threat to the polar bear is the melting of its sea ice habitat caused by human-induced climate change. We will continue to work toward comprehensive strategies for the long-term survival of this iconic species.”

The designation of critical habitat under the ESA does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or the public access to private lands. A critical habitat designation does not affect private lands unless federal funds, permits, or activities are involved.

The final designation, contained in a final rule that was submitted on November 23, 2010 to the Federal Register, encompasses three areas or units: barrier island habitat, sea ice habitat and terrestrial denning habitat. Barrier island habitat includes coastal barrier islands and spits along Alaska’s coast, and is used for denning, refuge from human disturbances, access to maternal dens and feeding habitat and travel along the coast. Sea ice habitat is located over the continental shelf, and includes ice over water up to 300 m (984 ft) in depth extending to the outer limits of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone, 321 km (200 miles) from shore.

Terrestrial denning habitat includes lands within 32 km (20 miles) of the northern coast of Alaska between the Canadian border and the Kavik River and within 8 km (5 miles) between the Kavik River and Barrow, Alaska. Approximately 96 percent of the area designated as critical habitat is sea ice habitat.

On October 29, 2009, the Service proposed to designate approximately 519,403 sq km (200,541

sq mi) as critical habitat for the polar bear. The final rule reduces this designation to 484,734 sq km (187,157 sq mi), a reduction due mostly to corrections designed to accurately reflect the U.S. boundary for proposed sea ice habitat.

In addition, the critical habitat designated 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; and 3) all existing manmade structures (regardless of land ownership status) are not included in the final critical habitat designation.

The polar bear was protected under the Endangered Species Act as threatened, range-wide, on May 15, 2008, due to loss of sea ice habitat caused by climate change. Other threats evaluated at that time included impacts from activities such as oil and gas operations, subsistence harvest, shipping, and tourism. No other impacts were considered as significant in the decline, but minimizing effects from these activities could become increasingly important for polar bears as their numbers decline.

The ESA requires that, to the maximum extent prudent and determinable, the Secretary of the Interior designate critical habitat at the time the species is added to the federal list of threatened and endangered species. However, the Service determined that additional time was needed to conduct a thorough evaluation and peer-review of a potential critical habitat designation, and thus did not publish a proposed designation when the listing's final rule was announced. As part of the settlement of a subsequent lawsuit brought by a group of conservation organizations, the Department of the Interior agreed to publish a Final Rule designating critical habitat for the polar bear. Today's announcement fulfills the terms of that agreement.

Polar bears evolved for life in the harsh arctic environment, and are distributed throughout most ice-covered seas of the Northern Hemisphere. They are generally limited to areas where the sea is ice-covered for much of the year; however, they are not evenly distributed throughout their range. They are most abundant near the shore in shallow-water areas, and in other places where currents and ocean upwelling increases marine productivity and maintains some open water during the ice-covered season.

Polar bears are completely dependent upon Arctic sea-ice habitat for survival. They use sea ice as a platform to hunt and feed upon seals, as a habitat on which to seek mates and breed, as a platform to move to onshore maternity denning areas, and make long-distance movements, and occasionally for maternity denning. Most populations use onshore habitat partially or exclusively for maternity denning.

Throughout most of their range, polar bears remain on the sea ice year-round or spend only short periods on land. There are two polar bear populations that occur in the U.S.; the Chukchi Sea population and the Southern Beaufort Sea population located to the west and north of Alaska. Internationally, they also occur throughout the East Siberian, Laptev, and Kara Seas of Russia; Fram Strait and Greenland Sea; Barents Sea of northern Europe; Baffin Bay, which separates Canada and Greenland; and through most of the Canadian Arctic archipelago.

The Service announced its original proposal to designate critical habitat on October 29, 2009, opening a 60-day public comment period. On May 5, 2010, the Service published in the Federal Register (75 FR 24545) a notice re-opening the public comment period and informing the public

of the availability of a Draft Economic Analysis on the proposed designation of critical habitat. The Service received over 111,000 public comments which were considered in the final decision.

The areas included in this critical habitat designation do encompass areas where oil and gas exploration activities are known to occur. 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 the species or to destroy or adversely modify its critical habitat. If a federal action may affect the polar bear or its critical habitat, the permitting or action agency must enter into consultation with the Service. Consultation is a process through which Federal agencies and the Service jointly work to identify potential impacts on listed species and their habitats, and identify ways to implement these actions consistent with species conservation. This applies to oil and gas development activities, as well as any other activity within the range of the polar bear that may have an adverse affect on the species.

For more information about the critical habitat final rule and other issues on polar bear conservation, please visit <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/polarbears/criticalhabitat.htm>.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

####