

# U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## Viewing Guidelines for Polar Bears



### **BACKGROUND AND BEHAVIOR AWARENESS**

Polar bears are most likely to be encountered along barrier islands or within a few miles of the coast, especially in the Beaufort Sea region during July-October. Large numbers may aggregate near Cross and Barter islands, and anywhere that marine mammal carcasses wash up. Some of these bears may have made long-distance swims or be nutritionally stressed; disturbing them may result in significant physiological stress.

Polar bears are often sensitive to boats, aircraft, and human presence. Noises, smells, and sights may elicit reactions that are either submissive (bear flees) or interactive (bear approaches). Bears that are viewed in close proximity to human settlements (villages, camps, industrial work areas) may have lost their natural fear of humans and be particularly dangerous to humans, especially if they have been previously food-rewarded.



### **FEDERAL LAWS AND MARINE MAMMAL VIEWING**

Polar bears are protected under both the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). The MMPA prohibits the TAKE of all marine mammal species in U.S. waters. TAKE is defined as "to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal." Harassment is defined in the MMPA as "any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which has the potential to injure a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild; or has the potential to disturb a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including, but not limited to, migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, or sheltering". Some exceptions are made for authorized scientific research, educational and commercial photography, subsistence harvest by Alaska Natives, defense of human life situations, or situations that are in the best interest (welfare) of the bear.

### **GUIDELINES FOR LAND-BASED APPROACHES AND VIEWING**

When viewing polar bears on land, ensure that your actions do not cause a change in their behavior; viewing should be accomplished without the animal's awareness of your presence. Using binoculars and telephoto lenses to view or photograph polar bears from a safe distance can help ensure that animals are not disturbed. Because polar bears are dangerous animals, they should not intentionally be approached on foot, or by un-enclosed conveyances such as ATVs. Even in a fully enclosed vehicle, approaching a polar bear may pose a substantial risk; no vehicle guarantees complete safety from a bear intent on entering it. If you choose to approach a polar bear by vehicle, approach slowly and stop movement if the bear notices you. To avoid disturbance, approach from downwind, using minimal lights and noise. For your safety, keep your windows rolled up and remain inside. **Do not attempt to bait, lure, or otherwise attract a bear for any reason.**



Please be aware that you may not be the only one that day that has approached these same animals, increasing levels of disturbance may occur with each successive visit. Since individual animal's reactions will vary, carefully observe animals and stop your approach if you observe any of the following behaviors (generally listed in increasing intensity of disturbance):

- Bear raises head
- Bear focuses on you
- Bear changes body posture, e.g. goes from laying to sitting
- Bear flees from you
- Bear approaches, charges or attempts to make contact with you (or your truck, boat, etc.).

Never attempt to herd, chase, or separate polar bears. Polar bears can move quickly; **keep your vehicle far enough away to ensure a safe retreat if a bear approaches or charges you. Never attempt to view polar bears at den sites.**

### **GUIDELINES FOR WATER-BASED APPROACHES/VIEWING**

Do not intentionally approach a swimming bear. If you encounter a swimming bear unexpectedly, remain lateral to its swimming direction and allow the bear(s) to pass. When viewing polar bears that are playing in the water, **ensure that your actions do not cause a change in their behavior.** Avoid sudden changes in travel direction and speed, and minimize engine noise.

Cautiously move away from polar bears if you observe any of the following behaviors:

- Frequent head turns toward the boat or other source of disturbance
- Rapid changes in the bear's swimming direction or speed
- Evasive behavior such as swimming away from the boat.



### **GUIDELINES FOR MANNED AND UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS**

**Aerial viewing or photography of polar bears from manned or unmanned aircraft systems (UAS, or drones) poses a high potential for disturbance and is specifically discouraged.** Unless taking off from or landing at an airport/strip, pilots of manned aircraft should maintain a minimum 1500' flight altitude and ½ mile buffer from polar bears in the water, and on ice or land. UAS should not be operated within ½ mile of polar bears. To help prevent disturbances, please follow these additional guidelines when operating aircraft near polar bears along the coast:

- Avoid circling over or turning near polar bears
- If safety conditions require flight operations below recommended altitudes, please pass inland or seaward (within safe gliding distance to shore) of known polar bear aggregations, or at the greatest lateral distance manageable for safe operation of the aircraft.

Please be aware that some locations may have stricter requirements, such as Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Please check the following website for more information: [www.fws.gov/refuge/arctic](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/arctic).

**Please remember: harassment or pursuit of marine mammals is prohibited by law; these guidelines may not prevent disturbances in all situations. You are responsible for operating your aircraft, vehicle, or marine vessel in a manner which does not cause disturbance or violate the Marine Mammal Protection Act.**

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Marine Mammal Management Office  
1011 East Tudor Road  
Anchorage, AK 99503  
1-800-362-5148

### **TO REPORT INCIDENCES OF HARASSMENT, INJURY OR POTENTIAL WASTEFUL HARVEST PLEASE CONTACT:**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Office of Law Enforcement  
1-877-535-1795 or 1-800-858-7621

**Thank you for your support and cooperation**