



Planning and Managing Polar Bear Viewing for the Future

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Planning Update / November 2016

Because of a recent significant increase in the number of polar bear viewing visitors, we are directing immediate attention toward a narrow planning effort focused on the management of polar bear viewing at the Refuge, now and into the next 15 years.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 identifies wildlife observation as one of the six priority public uses of Refuges. The Refuge developed a commercial guided polar bear viewing program within the protections provided by the Marine Mammals Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act to meet public demand for this activity.

In addition to the dramatic increases in the number of visitors viewing polar bears on Refuge waters, bears and viewers gather around Kaktovik at the same time that critical subsistence activities occur, so the potential for conflict is also increasing.

Because of these concerns, the Refuge is investing more effort in managing polar bear viewing on waters surrounding Kaktovik, and on other Refuge waters and lands. We're dedicated to ensuring that we provide quality polar bear viewing opportunities that minimize threats to public safety, minimize potential disturbance to polar bears, and minimize conflicts with local residents.

During 2017, Refuge staff will consider the extensive input we've received over the past years about issues related to polar bear viewing. We will focus our efforts on those issues within our influence, related to visitor activities on waters surrounding Kaktovik. We are especially interested in

using the desired conditions consistent with Arctic Refuge's special values to guide answers to questions, such as, how should Arctic Refuge manage visitor expectations, visitor behaviors, timing of visits, and location of visits; set visitor numbers; and identify strategies and tools to achieve our goals.

Look at the table below (in blue) to see some of the desired conditions and the special values they represent.

If you are interested in this planning effort, to develop and select management alternatives, please read through this update and the other information at www.fws.gov/refuge/arctic/pbvmanagement.html.

Timeline



| Arctic Refuge Special Values*: | Desired Conditions* for Commercial Polar Bear Viewing on Refuge Waters: |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Native Culture and Subsistence | ...coincides and is compatible with subsistence practices, respecting the diversity of human history, culture, and lifeways. |
| Science | ...teaches visitors how the natural world functions, both naturally and as it responds to large-scale, human-caused influences, such as global climate change. |
| Wildlife | ...creates opportunities for visitors to understand the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Refuge roles in polar bear conservation. ...occurs in the ecological context in which polar bears live and does not affect their natural behavior, interactions, cycles, and ecological role. |
| Wilderness / Recreation | ...is described as happening in an area with natural quiet, undeveloped character, and exceptional opportunities for solitude, adventure, and immersion in the natural world. |

* special values are the most prominent values the Refuge holds for the American public (as determined during the Refuge's recent Revised Comprehensive Conservation Planning effort (Revised CCP page 1-23)).

* desired conditions are statements of aspiration that describe resources, visitor experiences and opportunities, and facilities and services that we strive to achieve and maintain.

Polar bear female with cubs (USFWS)

