

# Response to WWF/TRAFFIC Report on Polar Bear Trade

In October 2012, WWF/TRAFFIC issued *Icon on Ice: International Trade and Management of Polar Bears*—a report partially funded by Canada’s federal wildlife agency, Environment Canada.

While the report takes no express position on the U.S. proposal to transfer the polar bear from Appendix II to Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), it suggests that existing management of this declining species may be sufficiently protective. However, as described below, many of the report’s findings actually demonstrate that the polar bear meets both the trade and biological criteria of CITES Appendix I and thus should be transferred to that Appendix. Further, the report contains several significant errors, also identified below.

## THE REPORT’S FINDINGS SUPPORT A CITES UPLISTING TO APPENDIX I

Pursuant to the Convention, “Appendix I shall include all species threatened with extinction which are or may be affected by trade.” Article II, para. 1.

### The report’s findings show that the polar bear is “threatened with extinction.”

Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP15) states that a species is considered to be “threatened with extinction” if it is characterized by, or likely to be characterized by, a marked decline in population size in the wild which has been inferred or projected on the basis of a decrease in area of habitat or a decrease in quality of habitat. Many of the report’s findings show that the polar bear meets this requirement and is thus “threatened with extinction.”

### The report acknowledges the science showing that polar bear decline due to climate change will be substantial.

- Acknowledges the 2007 USGS study, which projects that “over two-thirds of global polar bear population could disappear by mid-century due to restriction of habitat.” Although the TRAFFIC/WWF report notes WWF’s disagreement regarding how these projections should be applied under the CITES biological criteria, the report does not dispute the USGS projections. Pg. 22.

### The report acknowledges that climate change has impacted, and will impact, habitat and recruitment.

- Reiterates the substantial impacts climate change has and will have on polar bears, including “quantitative evidence for the effects of climate change on polar bear population dynamics,” “a statistically significant relationship between the timing of the spring [sea-ice] break-up and condition of polar bears,” and impacts on reproduction. Pgs. 18-21.

### The report clearly acknowledges that polar bears “are or may be affected by trade.”

Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP15) states that a species is or may be affected by trade if (1) “it is known to be in trade” and (2) “that trade has or may have a detrimental impact on the status of the species.” Many of the report’s findings show that the polar bear meets both of these requirements.

### The report acknowledges that polar bears are “known to be in trade”.

- Summarizes CITES export data from 1987-2009 and documents a total of 32,033 polar bear commodities traded, including 8,227 skins and 2,279 skulls. Pg. 86.
- Estimates that nearly 400 polar bears (or roughly half of the average 735 bears harvested annually) are traded internationally each year. Pgs. 116, 106.

### The report acknowledges that “trade has or may have a detrimental impact on the status of the species”.

- Recognizes that the number of polar bears harvested in Canada has risen at the same time that the demand for and value of their skins has increased. Indeed, citing a CBC News article, the report states that over the past few years the demand for polar bear skins has increased in importing countries such as Russia and China. The cited article found that auction houses “cannot meet the soaring demand for polar bear hides.” Pg. 79; CBC News (2011). With respect to the value of skins, the report states that the price of an 8-foot rug doubled in value between 2006 and 2010, from \$6,200 CAD to \$12,000 CAD. Pg. 3. It also shows that the average price of polar skins advertised on the internet increased from \$7,338 CAD in 2006 to \$18,833 CAD in 2010. Pg. 109; Table 5.7. At the same time, the report acknowledges that more polar bears are being killed. For example, the report shows that, in 2010/2011, significantly more bears were killed in Canada than in the four previous years. Pg. 30.

- Recognizes that as polar bears become more and more scarce, the demand for and price of skins will only increase over the long-term. Pg. 5 (“[b]ecause polar bear skins have increased in value recently, combined with the likelihood that polar bears might become scarcer due to climate change, the demand for and price of skins will face upward pressure over the long-term”).

- Admits that the response of polar bears to climate change will likely be influenced by hunting pressures. *See, e.g.*, pgs. 1-2 (“the responses of polar bears will differ between regions and will likely be influenced by ice conditions, availability of prey and hunting pressures”). *See also* pg. 17.

- Acknowledges that Canadian harvest management has been unsustainable in certain instances. *See* pg. 38 (describing the unsustainable Baffin Bay polar bear hunt that resulted in a 2009 negative non-detriment finding by Canada and Greenland and an import restriction in the EU of Baffin Bay and Kane Basin polar bears), pg. 39 (describing the ongoing Western Hudson Bay hunt that was deemed unsustainable by both the PBSG and Environment Canada in 2011), pg. 115 (acknowledging that “there remain valid concerns in regard to the information used in recent management discussions on harvest levels for at least two population units (Baffin Bay and Western Hudson Bay)”).

- Acknowledges that poaching in Russia “may be a significant challenge for the Chukchi Sea management unit,” pg. 57, and further notes the “concern that imported Canadian polar bear parts and derivatives could be used to launder a poached bear from Russia,” pg. 81.

## **THE REPORT MISSTATES OR IGNORES SEVERAL KEY FACTS:**

### **The report incorrectly implies that trade in polar bears has been and will continue to be stable.**

Analyzing limited CITES data, the report states “the total number of skins imported...did not increase significantly” between 2005 and 2009. Pg. 106. In fact, recent market demand for polar bears has increased substantially as reflected both in hides offered at auction and prices for skins:

- The number of polar bear hides offered at auctions in Canada more than tripled from 40 hides being offered in 2007 to 150 hides offered in 2012 (Fur Harvesters Auction Inc. 2012; CBC News 2011; Nunatsiaq News 2012; Macleans 2012).

- The average prices of hides sold at auction more than doubled from 2007 (USD 2,079) to 2012 (USD 5,211). Fur Harvesters Auction Inc. 2012; CBC News 2011; Nunatsiaq News 2012; Macleans 2012.

- Maximum hide prices achieved at auction more than doubled from 2007 (USD 6,100) to 2012 (USD 12,514). Fur Harvesters Auction Inc. 2012; CBC News 2011; Nunatsiaq News 2012; Macleans 2012.

- Citing these and other facts, a Macleans article from 2012 concluded that “[t]here’s good evidence the spike in polar bear prices has contributed to over-harvesting” in northern Quebec (Macleans 2012).

### **The report downplays serious problems with the management of several polar bear populations in Canada.**

It suggests that historical and continued overharvest of the Baffin Bay population was “resolved” when the local management authority reduced quotas; that unsustainable harvest from the Western Hudson Bay population may be “resolved” when surveys clarify the status of the population; and that recent overharvest of the Southern Hudson Bay population will not be repeated because of a voluntary quota and the promise of future government action. Pg. 38-39. In fact, the management of each of these populations raises serious questions about sustainable harvest and quotas:

- Baffin Bay: due to unsustainable hunting (according to the IUCN SSC/PBSG (2010), 212 on average killed when 176 sustainable), the Canadian federal government imposed a prohibition on exports, which it maintains today as the local management authority’s quota continues to be unsustainable.

- Western Hudson Bay: while acknowledging that the quota was nearly tripled in 2011 and that “[s]ome scientists and managers considered this number to be above sustainable limits” pg. 38, the report neglects to note that the IUCN SSC/PBSG opposed the quotas as unsustainable and that the federal government opposed the quota. It also failed to note that this quota was exceeded and that the local management authority increased the quota again for 2012/2013 against the advice of the IUCN SSC/PBSG.

- Southern Hudson Bay: while acknowledging that the number of polar bears legally hunted from Nunavik (northern Québec) was significantly higher in 2010/2011 than in previous years (74 polar bears compared to the four taken annually by Nunavik from 2006 to 2010), the report does not acknowledge concern by polar bear biologists that the one-year voluntary quota established for 2011/2012 of 60 bears is not sustainable (Marine Mammal Commission 2012).

### **The report misstates and omits key information regarding the status of the polar bear and the projected impact climate change will have on the species.**

#### **The report incorrectly describes the science-based trends for the Davis Strait and Lancaster Sound populations as stable or increasing.**

In fact, the IUCN SSC/PBSG (2010) finds the trends for these populations to be declining.

**The report falsely states that the 2007 U.S. Geological Survey report (Amstrup et al. 2007) “was fully considered by the PBSG when making their Red List Assessment of vulnerable and therefore might be expected to decline by greater than 30% but less than 50% in the next three generations.”**

Pg. 72. This is false. The polar bear was listed as Vulnerable in 2006 (Schliebe 2008), a year before the 2007 USGS report was published. IUCN has not reassessed the status of the species since then.

**The report fails to cite scientific papers on the impact of climate change on polar bear body condition, reproduction, and survival that were available at the time the report was prepared.**

For example, the report cites only three original scientific papers published on this topic since 2010, when in fact there have been at least a dozen. In all, key papers missing from the report include:

- Amstrup, S.C., B.G. Marcot and D.C. Douglas. 2008. A Bayesian network modeling approach to forecasting the 21st century worldwide status of polar bears. In: Arctic Sea Ice Decline: Observations, Projections, Mechanisms, and Implications, Geophysical Monograph Series vol. 180 (eds DeWeaver ET, Bitz CM, Tremblay LB), pp. 213–268. Geophysical Monograph 180, Washington DC.
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- Molnár, P.K., A.E. Derocher, G.W. Thiemann, and M.A. Lewis. 2010. Predicting survival, reproduction and abundance of polar bears under climate change. *Biol. Conserv.* 143: 1612-1622.

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## CONCLUSION

Overall, the WWF/TRAFFIC report on polar bear trade presents a strong case that the species meets both the threshold trade and biological criteria for a transfer to CITES Appendix I. However, the report also misstates or ignores important facts about the increasing trade of the species.

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