

NTI Comments on the “Draft National Polar Bear Conservation Strategy for Canada”

Introduction

Nunavut Inuit have harvested polar bears for thousands of years. Today, polar bears are important to Inuit for at least three reasons: social/cultural, nutritional and economic. Of these reasons, the first priority to Inuit is social-cultural, the second is nutritional and the third is economic. The social-cultural significance of polar bears is mainly the opportunity to hunt the polar bear. Inuit are considered part of the environment, and as such are the one of the few predators that the polar bear has.

The strategy in current form is unacceptable. It focuses entirely on biological characteristics of polar bears and lacks major components identified by the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement such as Conservation Principles and Social Objectives.

This strategy requires the government to “adequately consult” with Inuit in a meaningful way. NTI does not consider the current approach by either the Government of Nunavut or the Government of Canada as meaningful or adequate consultation. The following comments from NTI should not be considered as consultation with Inuit. It will be necessary that the signatories to this strategy respond to the comments and concerns of both NTI and the RWOs as part of the consultation process.

The Strategy also minimizes the adaptive co management process. In several sections, the strategy lacks previous knowledge and context such that major considerations relevant to polar bear conservation and management in Nunavut have been ignored. For example, the significance of the polar bear population in Nunavut, the management system in place in Nunavut and how it has evolved through the cooperation of Inuit from the 1960’s to present day is not identified. This poses a major concern because of the remote locations of the communities and the high compliance by Inuit to regulations put in place by government. Recognizing the characteristics of the harvest is critical to any national polar bear conservation strategy.

Any reference to Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge, Co-Management Boards or Adequate Consultation seems to be at the back of sections or just put in the document in a token fashion.

The tone, structure and approach of the document also present a number of concerns. A balanced perspective is needed to reach consensus and to achieve objectives between the different jurisdictions especially when developing a coordinated framework of management and research. The land claims process has advanced management by acknowledging the role of Inuit as part of the solution rather than the problem. Instead this document regresses these achievements by presenting a perspective that biological information is the single most important feature of the conservation strategy for polar bears.

As such, this document should try to avoid the status designations used by the Polar Bear Technical Committee to classify polar bear sub-populations as either: Stable, Increasing or Decreasing. The use of these designations in mass media without proper context has led to confusion and misunderstanding especially in Inuit communities. It has become a sensitive issue that has caused mistrust and anger in

the communities. It has also caused division and strained the working relationship and trust between communities and researchers. If this Strategy is to be successful there has to be an improvement on how the situation is portrayed and explained to the media. An example is that Davis Strait is portrayed as a “Declining Population” despite that all of the experts agree that the population has increased significantly from 800 to 1000 animals to about 2300 animals over the past few decades.

This also includes taking notice of global environmental change that includes climate change as well as other global processes including biodiversity loss and social and economic change. However, the focus has been exclusively on climate change and the impact on polar bears in a small area has been repeatedly portrayed as catastrophic. The result is that there is a perception that there are only a few polar bears left in the Arctic and those that remain are in danger of drowning or starving. There is little or no awareness by the general public of the management system in place or the role that hunters have in an ecosystem. Therefore, this strategy does not account for the complexity of the social ecological system between hunters and their ecosystem. For example, hunters have been managing for resilience, maintaining natural variation and capacity of the population to absorb disturbance through current regulations such as the flexible quota system. We recognize that the specific management regulations are different between jurisdictions but this should not preclude its relevance in a national document in which the majority of the polar bear populations occur in Nunavut.

This document should also address information at different scales, including user, local and traditional ecological knowledge. The development and support for a Traditional Knowledge committee or framework for consultation and involvement by stakeholders is important and should be more prominent in the Strategy.

Summary

1. In the summary as well as throughout the document, the term “threats” is used. Would it be better to use the term “impacts”? The use of the word “threats” is confrontational, whether you are talking to Industry, Shipping companies, Hunters or Tourism Operators – they will automatically be on the defensive if you characterize them as a threat to Polar Bears.

Background

1. There should be reference to specific Land Claim Agreements and Constitutional obligations.
2. Public Safety is not mentioned, shouldn't there be reference to what will be required if Polar Bears are impacting or threatening human safety?

Status and Conservation in Canada

There needs to be a bit more text and historical perspective on the evolving mechanism to review and list species. This is important in the sense of how listing was done, management actions taken at the time – especially as it relates to Inuit in pre-1999 NWT and post-1999 Nunavut.

1. Not at Risk - COSEWIC 1986
2. Special Concern – 1991

3. Special Concern – confirmed 1999, 2002 and 2008
4. Special Concern under SARA – consultations are underway

Objectives

1. Best Practice standards are an issue
2. Why the continued reference to sub-populations?
3. Explanation of 4.2 – what are threats? For example are there more impacts and damage to bears from research than there is from ship traffic?

Threats to Polar Bear Conservation (Impacts/Influences on Polar Bear Conservation)

1. Climate Change - changing habitat – how do we identify the carrying capacity of an area?
2. Separation from terrestrial denning areas? What is the meaning of this statement?
3. Resource Industry activities
4. Shipping – need to identify the impact and routes of cruise ships
5. Inappropriate harvest level – This implies that harvesting is a threat. The Nunavut Land Claims Agreement envisions a management system that complements Inuit harvesting rights.
 - a. NLCA Principles 5.1.2 (e) there is a need for an effective system of wildlife management that complements Inuit harvesting rights and priorities, and recognizes Inuit systems of management that contribute to the conservation of wildlife and protection of wildlife habitat.
 - b. NLCA Principles 5.1.2 (h) there is a need for an effective role for Inuit in all aspects of wildlife management; including research;
 - c. NLCA Objectives 5.1.3 (b) the creation of a wildlife management system that (ii) fully acknowledges and reflects the primary role of Inuit in wildlife harvesting, This is a fundamental concern – we are at a point in time where Aboriginal harvesting rights in Provinces to the south have been compromised and traditions lost, we do not want this to happen in Nunavut.
6. Human Bear conflicts – the need for a properly funded Polar Bear alert, awareness and prevention is required. Compensation for damage to property.
7. Add a section as 5.7

Intrusive Scientific Research: Immobilization, tagging and collaring of polar bears has the potential for direct mortality and disturbance, including disruption to family groups and disturbance of bears in dens. Environmental change will likely require more research on polar bears and this will increase the disturbance and mortality of polar bears. Until current research methods are changed to be less intrusive, research is a threat to polar bear conservation.

Challenges to Polar Bear Conservation

1. **6.2 Difficulty in obtaining information** - the coordination of information and how it is used needs to be reviewed. When media is used to twist the information and interviews occur.

2. **Habitat Conservation** – the reference to Western Hudson Bay, where there is a major disagreement between researchers and Inuit is not a good example to use.
3. **Interaction of threats** – the concept of sustainable harvest no longer applies?
4. **Overpopulation** - Should there be a reference to overpopulation like Davis Strait where the population is now in decline, how is the role of Inuit/harvesters in the eco-system recognized?.
5. **Allocation of Harvest** – identification of issues and how to approach them?

Guiding Principles

1. Why are we managing polar bears? What is the main purpose? Is it to provide for a sustainable harvest or is it to ensure the tourism industry survives? There is a need to identify the need to recognize the importance of continuous harvesting of polar bears by Inuit, there should be no moratoriums on harvesting, but harvesting should be allowed at reduced rates to ensure the continuity of harvesting practices for the protection of the Inuit culture. The Rio declaration on Environment and development proclaims that: Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature. It is clear that we need to broaden management goals to include livelihood and equity objectives, in addition to biological and economic objectives in order to achieve any conservation strategy objectives.
2. 7.2 - do we want bears managed at the sub-population level? If so, is it done in relation to other sub-populations and recognized that these are not **closed** populations?
3. Need more info on how to incorporate traditional knowledge and link it with Consultation and involvement in research as per NLCA section 5.1.2 (h)
4. 7.4 – Lack of certainty does not give discretion to infringe on Inuit harvesting rights as per NLCA 5.3.3.
 - a. 7.4 Where there are threats of serious or irreparable damage to polar bear populations within subpopulations, lack of certainty will not be a reason for postponing reasonable or precautionary conservation measures.
 - b. *5.3.3 of the Nunavut Land Claim Agreement states: Decisions of the NWMB or a Minister made in relation to Part 6 shall **restrict or limit Inuit harvesting only to the extent necessary**: (a) to effect a valid conservation purpose; (b) to give effect to the allocation system outlined in this Article, to other provisions of this Article and to Article 40; or (c) to provide for public health or public safety*
5. 7.6 and 7.8 should be higher in the list and more detail to specific constitutional obligations needs to be identified. 7.6 states: “Harvesting of polar bears is a vital cultural activity for many northern Aboriginal peoples. Ensuring that the harvest of polar bears continues in a coordinated and sustainable manner is an integral component of the collective Canadian management system” there should be clarity that there is a need to identify and recognize the importance of continuous harvesting of polar bears by Inuit, there should be no moratoriums on harvesting,

but harvesting should be allowed at reduced rates to ensure the continuity of harvesting practices.

6. Add a section on Scientific Research as 7.10 - Scientific research on polar bears will recognize the effects of immobilizing, tagging and collaring polar bears. All research on polar bears will be conducted in a manner that will reduce the effects on polar bears and whenever research will be done, it is done as unobtrusively as possible.

Framework

1. PBAC and the role with other interests than just PBTC need to be identified. All Government jurisdictions should be aware of the importance of including stakeholders. An example of this is the Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge sub-committee under the Species at Risk Act.
2. Shared populations – more info on this - Reference to the Inuvialuit and west Kitikmeot User to User Agreement.
3. Sub-populations and the continued reference to it need to be broadened. Related areas or larger Designated Units need to be recognized as per the discussions at the June 2010 Winnipeg meeting. Larger areas that also have overlap or grey areas and influences need to be considered. The impact on one area as it relates to others needs to be recognized. Working in isolation allows for too much bias and leads to further misrepresentation of the situation. If the document is going to use examples, then reference should be made to the sudden decline in M'Clintock Channel and all of a sudden there was a sudden increase for Gulf of Boothia. These are not closed populations.
4. It should be noted that Polar Bear Technical Committee and the Polar Bear Specialist Group are an exclusive membership that received little attention and guidance by authorities until Polar Bears came onto the international scene. All bodies need some forms of checks and balances and the decisions underlying these groups have been directed by polar bear biologists with little regard to other sources of knowledge. Although Inuit organizations are often invited, they are often perceived as tokens. This can be seen by the discussions on membership for PBTC when discussing the terms of reference for PBTC (please see PBTC minutes ...)
5. **The monitoring provisions and timelines as per 8.4 needs to have broader discussion and should include input from other stakeholders than just the PBAC and PBTC.**
6. The discussion on 8.6 needs to be more prominent and the concerns about scientific methods and the impacts need to be under more scrutiny than the current situation.
7. Two areas review to monitoring (8.4 and 8.7) – there needs to be a move towards more involvement of Inuit in all aspects of research and management as per NLCA 5.1.2 (h) and move away from excessive drugging and handling of bears.

Implementation

1. The statement of 9.1 raises a point that should be recognized. Inuit Circumpolar Council has been very effective at raising awareness about Climate Change. Inuit are now concerned that harvesting by Inuit is now portrayed negatively nationally and internationally is a result of the

PBTC and PBSG status designations and misunderstanding generated through polar bear biologists predicting that polar bear populations will become extirpated. It compromises the relationship between Inuit and scientists and ultimately conservation.

2. The development of annexes by PBTC and PBAC exclusively is of concern. If other stakeholders are not involved or able to develop or comment on workplans, review of the strategy including annexes then the implementation of conservation actions becomes problematic.
3. The list of Annexes should also include Intrusive Research techniques and the development and oversight of an ethics committee that would monitor how research is done, where funding sources come from, what are the management objectives of the research, and are researchers involving and working with the impacted communities.

Signatories

1. There is no signature block for NTI, was this an oversight or an issue?