

POLAR BEAR CRITICAL HABITAT: Fact Sheet



- America's entire polar bear population, about 2,500 individuals and one-fifth of the world population, depends on the Arctic Ocean's Beaufort and Chukchi seas and adjacent coastal areas, including the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, for survival.
- Polar bears depend on the rapidly disappearing Arctic sea ice for hunting, resting, breeding and birthing their young.
- The Polar Ice Caps, the regions around the Earth's poles that are permanently covered with ice and snow, are currently melting at a rate of 10 percent per decade due to the impacts of climate change. That is a loss of 28,000 square miles per year. The thickness of the ice in the Arctic has already decreased by 40 percent since 1960.
- In the past two decades, the polar bear population has declined by 17 percent as a result of decreased formation of sea ice and melting ice caps. If predictions of melting sea ice are accurate, two-thirds of the world's polar bear population could be gone by 2050 – including the entire American population.
- Female polar bears build their dens on sea ice or land. With the accelerating decline of Arctic sea ice, land dens are becoming increasingly important to the survival of the polar bear as a species.
- The coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the most important land denning habitat for American polar bears.
- Polar bears look for optimal conditions for their land dens – the most critical factor is that the area is free from human disturbance. They also look for coastal bluffs, steep river banks and small cut banks and streams that catch drifting snow, located where land and marine habitat come together. The coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge provides all these conditions.
- It is estimated that 800 wells would be necessary to access the oil within the Arctic Refuge's coastal plain and that drilling and transportation activities would spread across the entire 1.5 million-acre coastal plain – the same area that provides vital land denning habitat for polar bears.
- Maternal polar bears with newborn cubs can be prematurely displaced from their winter dens by the noise, vibrations and human disturbance associated with oil exploration activities. This displacement may result in potentially fatal human-bear conflicts, and may expose the cubs to increased mortality due to harsh winter conditions for which they are not yet prepared.
- The federal government has estimated a 40 percent likelihood of a large spill in the Chukchi Sea if drilling proposals move forward in the Arctic Ocean. At the present time, there is no proven technology and limited capacity to clean up a spill in the Arctic's icy conditions.
- If an oil spill were to occur in the Arctic, polar bears would inevitably ingest oil by grooming their own oil-covered fur or through the consumption of other contaminated animals - this ingestion would be fatal.