U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Polar Bears and Humans
Safety Guidelines

Polar bear density in Alaska is highest during fall months when polar bears aggregate along the coastline. Due to changing ice conditions the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) anticipates that polar bear use of the coast will increase during open-water seasons (June through October). During this time many villagers engage in subsistence activities, and more people are engaging in polar bear viewing opportunities. Increasing numbers of visitors to Barrow and Kaktovik to view polar bears increase potential interactions between humans and polar bears. Polar bears are naturally curious and predatory which are factors that increase risk to humans.

The purpose of these guidelines is to minimize polar bear-human interactions and maximize the safety of both humans and polar bears, so each can continue to live safely in the Arctic environment.

FEDERAL LAW REGARDING POLAR BEAR-HUMAN INTERACTIONS

Polar bears are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) which prohibits take of any marine mammal.

Take is defined under the MMPA as: "to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal." This includes feeding or attempting to feed a marine mammal in the wild.

Level A Harassment is: any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which has the potential to injure a polar bear.

Level B Harassment is defined as: any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which has the potential to disturb a polar bear by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including, but not limited to, migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, or sheltering.

This means that any change in a polar bear's natural behavior that is a result of your presence in proximity to the animal can be considered level B harassment, and is unlawful.

A mother protecting her cubs may display defensive behavior by huffing or snapping her jaws.

Some exceptions are:

- Take for subsistence purposes, as long as take is not wasteful. The hunter is required to have the hide and skull tagged within 30 days. Harvest taggers are located in coastal villages to help.

- Authorized harassment of bears (deterrence) by government officials (i.e. North Slope Borough Polar Bear Patrol) is permissible as long as it is done in a humane manner and is for the welfare of the bear, the public, or non-lethal removal of nuisance animals that pose a risk to public safety.

- Defense of life take is only permissible if such taking is imminently necessary in self defense or to save the life of a person in immediate danger, and such taking is reported to FWS within 48 hours. Public officials have the authority to use lethal methods to protect the public from polar bears, and may do so when all reasonable steps to avoid killing the bear(s) have been taken.

- Scientific research such as polar bear population surveys, ecology studies etc. can be authorized.

- Photographing polar bears in the wild is permissible if no take occurs. If such activity is for educational or commercial purposes and could result in Level B harassment (disturbance), a permit is required.

Polar bears are also listed as a "threatened" species under the Endangered Species Act. This designation does not alter the definitions or exceptions of take outlined above under the MMPA.

GUIDELINES FOR LIVING IN POLAR BEAR COUNTRY

Most polar bears avoid people and have historically inflicted few human injuries and fatalities. However, the combination of curious and occasional sudden aggressive behavior creates the potential for human injury. In addition, polar bears spending extended periods of time on land without an adequate food source may be nutritionally stressed animals and potentially more dangerous.

In general, polar bears will react to humans by avoiding them, exhibiting curious behavior, treating them as other bears, or attempting to prey on them. The closer that humans are to polar bears, the more dangerous the situation because of the increased likelihood that the polar bear(s) will feel threatened. This could result in an attack. Unprovoked predatory attacks on humans are rare but do occur. The following guidelines may help reduce the risk associated with living in polar bear country.

Remain undetected

The best way to avoid detection by a polar bear is to be alert and detect the animal before it detects you. Be particularly alert in areas where bears are likely to occur: near open water leads, at whale or other marine mammal carcass sites, along coastal and river bluffs, or in the vicinity of fresh tracks.

- Avoid traveling alone;

Sub-adults may display curious behavior: moving head around to catch scents, ears forward, stopping frequently.

- When in coastal areas, remain vigilant and be aware of your surroundings;
- Stay down-wind from known polar bear aggregation sites to avoid detection.

Avoid close interactions
Viewing animals should be accomplished without the animal's awareness of your presence. Little information is available regarding what constitutes a safe viewing distance. Polar bears are individualistic and react differently to both noise and human presence. A general rule of thumb is that the closer you are to the animal, the more likely you are to disturb it.

- Use binoculars and high powered scopes to avoid approaching too closely;
- Be aware that when on land bears typically rest during day and become more active during dusk, night, or dawn hours.

Avoid pursuing polar bears
Harassment or pursuit of polar bears is prohibited by law.

- Never attempt to herd, chase, or separate groups of polar bears;
- Using motorized vehicles, including boats, to view bears should be avoided if it results in unnatural behavior by bears.

Minimize attractants
Polar bears will investigate anything out of the ordinary as a possible food item. The presence of attractants are likely to increase the chances of having close bear-human interactions. If a bear learns to associate food with humans, it is likely to attempt obtaining food from humans in the future. A polar bear that receives a food reward is very likely to return.

- Do not let bears associate food with humans;
- Maintain a clean camp or residence; remove attractants such as food, garbage, animal carcasses, sewage, gray water, anti-freeze, or petroleum products;
- Store food or attractants in bear-resistant containers or locations;
- Avoid carrying food or items with strong odors when traveling in bear country.

Be Aware of Bear Behavior
Ensure that your actions do not cause a change in behavior of a polar bear. Since individual animal's reactions will vary, carefully observe all animals and leave the vicinity if you see signs of disturbance. Polar bears that stop what they are doing to turn their head or sniff the air in your direction may have become aware of your presence. These animals may exhibit curious, threatened, or predatory behavior.

- Curious polar bears typically move slowly, stopping frequently to sniff the air, moving their heads around to catch a scent, or hold their heads high with ears forward.
- A threatened or agitated polar bear may huff, snap its jaws together, stare at you (or object of threat) and lower its head to below shoulder level, pressing its ears back and swaying from side to side. These are signals for immediate withdrawal. If ignored, the polar bear may charge. Threatened animals may also retreat, withdraw, or run away.
- Predatory behavior may involve a polar bear that is sneaking or crawling up on an object it considers prey. Another form of predatory behavior is a bear that is approaching in a straight line at a constant speed without exhibiting curious or threatened behavior. This behavior is indicative of a bear about to attack.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH A POLAR BEAR

If a polar bear detects and approaches you, get out of the way if you are in the bear's path, or between a mother and her cubs. If the animal continues to approach and you are in a vehicle, leave the area. If no vehicle is available, slowly move to a safe shelter. If no safe shelter is available, do not run; stand your ground. Gather people together in a group and/or hold a jacket over your head to look bigger. If the bear continues to approach, shout or make noise to deter the bear.

If a polar bear attacks in a predatory manner and no safe shelter is available, defend yourself. If the attack is by a female defending her cubs, remove yourself as a threat to the cubs; fight back if the attack turns predatory.

The future of polar bears is uncertain due to the combination of climate change effects and human-caused mortality. We encourage everyone to seek non-lethal methods of avoiding bear-human conflicts. This may help ensure polar bears are here in the future.

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