

Animal Life

FACT FILE

Length (from nose to tail):

Male - 200 to 340 cm

Weight: Male 400-680 kg

(Females are half the size of a male polar bear)

Diet: Ringed seals, bearded seals, harp seals, young walrus & whale, fish, seabirds.

Offspring: Usually 2 cubs

Habitat: Circumpolar Arctic in Alaska (US), Canada, Greenland, Russia and Norway. Polar bears do not live in the southern hemisphere.

Latin name: *Ursus maritimus* (meaning "sea bear")

Photo: Steve Amstrup, US Fish & Wildlife

Polar Bears



Polar bears are found throughout the circumpolar Arctic on pack ice, along or near coasts, and on islands. They share this habitat with indigenous peoples, and animals such as ringed seals, arctic foxes, narwhal, beluga whales, and millions of migratory birds.

There are believed to be at least 22,000 polar bears worldwide, and about 60 per cent of these are in Canada. Tracks have been reported as far north as the pole, but scientists believe few bears travel beyond 82° north latitude. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) recently listed polar bears as "threatened" species.

The northern Arctic Ocean has little food for them. Polar bears spend much of their time at or near the edge of the pack ice. This is where they are most likely to find food. As the southern edge of the arctic ice cap melts in summer, some bears will follow the retreating ice north to stay close to seals and other prey. Other bears spend their summers on land, living off body fat stored from successful hunting in the spring and winter. When the ice returns in the autumn, the bears leave land and return to the sea ice.

A healthy diet for polar bears consists of about 2 kg (4.4 lbs) of fat per day. Ringed seals, with their high body fat content, are the polar bear's main food, but they will

feed on other animals when these are scarce. Ringed seals are a particularly energy-rich food source, especially for hungry mothers and their growing cubs. Polar bears can devour huge amounts of fat when prey is plentiful (usually between late April and mid-July), helping the polar bears build up body weight to survive the ice-free season.

The polar bear is under threat from climate change. With the Earth's temperature rising due to air pollution, sea ice in the Arctic is melting earlier and forming later each year, reducing the length of time that polar bears can feed.

Polar bears evolved from brown bears during the Pleistocene, the time period that spanned from 1.8 million to 11,000 years ago. They have adapted to life in the north where temperatures do not exceed 10°C (50°F) in summer and typically fall to -30°C (-22°F) during winter. Their thick coat is made up of water repellent hairs that conserve heat. Under their dense fur is black skin, good for absorbing the rays of the arctic sun. A layer of fat up to 11 cm (4.3 in) thick keeps the bears warm, especially while swimming. Polar bears are so well insulated that they have to move slowly to avoid overheating.

These bears have enormous paws that function like snowshoes, distributing their

weight to keep them from breaking through ice and snow. The pads of their feet are covered with soft, tiny growths called papillae, which increase friction between paw and ice and reduce the chance of slipping.

They have sharp, jagged back teeth, and canines that are larger and sharper than grizzly bear teeth, but they rather than chewing.

Polar bears are usually solitary animals but in southern areas of the Arctic they gather together on land during the ice-free season. Breeding pairs remain together for about a week then separate. In the late autumn, pregnant females dig dens in deep snow drifts on land while the rest of the population remains active on the ice through the winter. After about two months, the cubs are born in the den. There are usually two cubs, which stay with their mother for about 2.5 years before striking out on their own.

For the last three years, WWF has tracked polar bears in the Arctic. Their positions are beamed from collars on the bears' necks, via satellite to scientists, and then to the WWF website. It allows them to get regular updates about how the polar bears behave in their arctic environment and how they may be affected by climate change.

Read about the WWF Polar Bear Tracker at http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/where_we_work/arctic/polar_bear/tracking/index.cfm

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