

# **The polar bears are fine: Certain populations coping with a warming Arctic better than expected**

But prospects remain grim for a 1,000 lb. carnivore used to hunting seals from sea ice. Scrapping by on sea birds and ground squirrels won't cut it for long

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In a large chunk of Canada's eastern Arctic, says a new report, polar bears — the ubiquitous icon of a warming world — appear to be doing just fine.

In the Baffin Bay fjords just north of Iqaluit, bear populations were at 2,826, about the same as the last time they counted in 1997 — and “considerably larger” than what was expected. Just to the north in Kane Basin, meanwhile, polar bear numbers are going up.

“Inuit knew right along that the polar bears in those two areas were increasing, because of more sightings,” said James Eetoolook, vice president of Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., the organization in charge of treaty rights for Nunavut Inuit.

Speaking to the National Post, Eetoolook said that Nunavut Tunngavik is now pressing to have export bans lifted for bear hunters in the Baffin Bay region.

The new report adds to a growing body of literature showing that Canada's polar bears seem to be dealing with a melting Arctic better than expected.

“There’s no doubt about what’s happening to Arctic sea ice ... but their populations aren’t declining as was once expected,” said Douglas Clark, a University of Saskatchewan researcher who has worked on human polar bear interaction..

In a paper last year, Canadian polar bear ecologist Nicholas Lunn found that bear populations in Western Hudson Bay were relatively stable between 2001 and 2011, even as ice vanished underneath them.

In 2014, researchers with the American Museum of Natural History found that bears were adapting to shorter ice seasons by finding more of their food on land.

In a statement, the museum reiterated that polar bears were “very susceptible” to warming temperatures. “But we’re finding that they might be more resilient than is commonly thought,” added Robert Rockwell with the Museum’s Department of Ornithology.

A 2015 analysis of Nunavut’s Foxe Basin found 2,585 bears, which was roughly in line with bear numbers from the 1990s. “This result, along with robust cub production, suggests a stable and healthy population despite deteriorating sea ice conditions,” wrote lead author Seth Stapleton.

The most striking example came when Alaskan biologist Karen Rode compared polar bear populations in Canada’s Beaufort Sea to those in the Chukchi Sea, the body of water separating Russia from Alaska.

Both seas are experiencing rapid ice loss, but while the Canadian bears were losing weight, the Alaskan bears were found to be just as fat and happy as ever.

Researchers surmised that warming waters had spawned a bonanza of new seals, temporarily insulating the Alaska bears from the fate of their Canadian cousins.

“This suggests that polar bears may exhibit complex and nonlinear responses to climate change,” wrote Rode.

To be sure, polar bear biologists remain convinced that the forecast for the world's polar bears remains grim.

“The underlying concept is pretty simple. Bears need sea ice as a platform from which to hunt seals,” wrote biologist Ian Stirling in an email to the National Post.

A veteran researcher at the University of Alberta, Stirling is a world-recognized expert on all things polar bear.

For thousands of years, the animals have fed themselves primarily by scooping seals off sea ice.

Without ice as a hunting platform, thousands of bears are suddenly going to be spending a huge chunk of the year scraping by on sea birds, ground squirrels and the occasional beached whale.

And, for a 1,000 lb. carnivore accustomed to eating tonnes of blubber, some extra grazing isn't going to cut it.

“The idea that they are just going to adapt somehow to a largely different ecological environment that they have been evolving into for a few hundred thousand years is simply unrealistic wishful thinking,” said Stirling.

What scientists can be sure of is that the Arctic is going to keep melting. And whichever way they plot it for ice-dependent polar bears, the result is an Arctic littered with bear bones.

Overlying all of this is that a polar bear is a notoriously difficult animal to count. Polar bears are loners who range across hundreds of kilometers of Arctic — sometimes in a single day.

Meanwhile, changing conditions have dramatically shifted the species' migration patterns. Bears no longer go to the same places that they did in the 1990s, which makes it hard to do accurate region-by-region comparisons.

It means that scientists are rarely confident in comparing their polar bear counts to numbers from 20 years ago. The latest Baffin Bay study, for instance, was sure to note that the animals might still be in decline if they were undercounted in the 1990s.

Still, the polar bear is not like other vulnerable species like the Ross' gull or the spring salamander.

Since the 1990s, environmental groups have spent millions to highlight the massive carnivores as the first and most charismatic victim of an ice-free Arctic. Indeed, no climate change protest is complete without someone in a polar bear suit.

The inevitable blowback is that any time polar bears are found to be keeping their head above water, Greenpeace and others face accusations of having cried wolf.

“We're way past being able to make generalizations ... but a whole lot of people have a lot of positions staked on that, and that's where things get politicized,” said Douglas Clark.

In 2011, an aerial survey of Western Hudson Bay found nearly 1,000 bears, contradicting years of Environment Canada ground surveys predicting that bear populations would plunge as low as 600.

In a statement at the time, James Eetoolook accused polar bear scientists of damaging Inuit communities, who hunt polar bears for meat, fur and to support a small sports hunting economy.

“This is not about climate change. This is about how polar bears were used to draw attention to climate change,” Eetoolook said in 2012.

Two years ago, a Northwest Territories report set out to ask Inuvialuit (Western Canadian Inuit) their view of polar bear populations. Some elders reporting no change to polar bear numbers, while others spoke of regions eerily cleared of the animals. “I hate to say that, but maybe there’s less bears,” said one in the Victoria Island hamlet of Ulukhaktok.

Although Baffin Bay numbers seem to be remaining stable, the latest report does find that their body condition appears to be deteriorating.

“The problem is, we could go along for some time thinking everything’s fine, and then populations fall off a cliff,” said Clark.

Stirling said that the plight of Canada’s polar bears were akin to a calm before the storm, or a candle burning brightest before it goes out.

Bears may be dealing well with reduced ice in seal-rich areas, but they still risk being utterly thrashed if they’re suddenly hit with two to three years of longer summers.

Warming is not universal, and is having a unique effect on every region and every polar bear population. But, says Stirling, “warming will eventually reach them all unless we are able to slow or stop it in time.”