

Polar Bears – The Extreme and the Mean

Editorial by Eugene Lapointe



In this month's issue of Sustainable eNews we take a close look at the sealing issue, which gains negative publicity as a result of the actions of animal rights groups. But those who live in the Arctic and watch the local wildlife are equally mystified by the recent US federal government listing of the polar bear on the endangered species list. According to many observers, including scientists who specialize in knowing about polar bear adaptations and biology, and a political analyst, Jim Beers, who has intimately known the US Fish & Wildlife Service, the listing was done for political, not biological reasons.

Polar bears hunt on land when necessary, always have, and always will, if and when the sea ice is diminished. They have adapted very well to climate changes over the last 13,000 years by increasing to around 50,000 animals in the circumpolar Arctic. Their prey, seals and sea lions, are also increasing, aided by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which prohibits commercial harvests for no good reason. When seals come to rest on shore, the bears will be there to greet them.

Jim Beers and others who have seen the progression of political trends in "protecting" species that do not need this service, are still speaking up in defense of the primacy of scientific judgment rather than political pressure when policies about environmental protection are made. The coal and oil industries are not responsible for any impending demise of the polar bear or its habitat. And polar bears, more numerous now than at any time in the last hundred years, are not going to go away.

On the other extreme, a polar bear was born recently in a Berlin zoo, and he and his sibling were abandoned by their mother. One cub died, and a zoo employee raised baby Knut on a bottle, giving him personal attention. Knut has thrived on this and will soon be on public display; a happy infant animal successfully raised to add his genes to the pool. The German public is delighted. Ironically, some in the animal rights movement in Germany have demanded that Knut be killed because in their view it is morally wrong to cuddle and tame a bear. Their view is that a fierce predator must not be influenced by humans in such a way as to cause it to be social with people. Therefore, it should be euthanized.

This highlights a contradiction amongst animal rights advocates. Some want to destroy our lifestyle because they believe loss of industrialization will "save" the environment, at the price of millions of human lives and welfare. Others demand that a small animal must be eliminated rather than allowed to live in a manner that is alternative to what would be experienced in the wild. What does all this mean?

Increasingly, it looks like this is all about humans expressing power over one another and the world we live in. Fortunately for Knut, he will be spared arbitrary death to live a life of luxury, human companionship, and abundant food. Unfortunately for the management of wild polar bears, these animals cannot be hunted by Americans, who are forbidden to bring home the pelts or mounts of this "marine mammal" because it has become a political icon. Thus conservation of these creatures will not be partially funded by the dollars of those hunters.

IWMC is a strong proponent of the importance of science in wildlife management and in proper assessments of the state of the environment. Politics can never be eliminated in the policy making process, but it should not take precedence over the recommendations of sound science. Political "good intentions" will turn out to be un"bear"able if real world conditions are misrepresented. ■

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