Meeting of the parties to the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears

Tromsø, Norway, 17 – 19 March 2009

OUTCOME OF MEETING ***

Climate change has a negative impact on polar bears and their habitat and is the most important long term threat facing polar bears. Action to mitigate this threat is beyond the scope of the Polar Bear Agreement. Climate change affects every nation on the earth and reaches well beyond the five parties to the Agreement so the parties look to other fora and national and international mechanisms to take appropriate action to address climate change.

Introduction

The Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears was concluded in Oslo, Norway, on 15 November 1973, and today has Canada, Greenland, Norway, Russia and the United States of America as parties.

At a polar bear range states meeting in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, USA, 26 – 28 June 2007, the range states, in accordance with the provisions of the Agreement, including Articles VIII and IX, agreed that meetings under the Agreement should be held on a biennial schedule or otherwise as agreed to by the Parties.

The range states also agreed in Shepherdstown that the first such meeting should be held in 2009, and in 2008 the parties welcomed the offer of Norway to host such a meeting.

Against this background, the five parties met in Tromsø, Norway, 17 – 19 March 2009, with an objective to provide an update on the conservation status for the polar bears, review implementation of the Agreement, identify useful polar bear conservation strategies and to discuss mechanisms for enhanced implementation of the Agreement.

Harvest Management

The parties continue to regard harvest management as an important part of polar bear management. The parties note the important progress made in developing sustainable harvest regimes, including the setting of bilateral coordinating mechanisms. The parties recognized the cultural and nutritional importance of subsistence harvest of polar bears to the Native peoples of the north.

Polar bears and climate change

The parties agreed that impacts of climate change and the continued and increasing loss and fragmentation of sea ice -- the key habitat for both polar bears and their main prey species -- constitutes the most important threat to polar bear conservation.

The parties noted with deep concern the escalating rates and extent of changes in the Arctic induced by climate change to date and that future changes are projected to be even larger. The parties agreed that long term conservation of polar bears depends upon successful mitigation of climate change.

Management responses

The parties agreed that conservation of polar bears requires adaptive management in response to climate change. The primary adaptation strategy will be to manage and reduce the other stresses on polar bears and their ecosystems, such as habitat destruction, harvesting, pollution and anthropogenic disturbance. Furthermore, continued climate change amplifies such stressors and underscores the need for proactive and comprehensive management strategies.

Resilience of polar bear populations to climate change depend upon proactive approaches and should be explored further to encourage conservation planning that is relevant both today and in the future. The parties have differing capabilities and recognized the advantages of sharing best management practices that address the range of impacts associated with climate change.

The parties agreed that effective responses depend upon an understanding of likely regional climatic and ecological changes. Monitoring climate and environmental change – in particular loss of sea ice and denning habitat - and associated responses in polar bear populations and the ecosystems that they depend upon is vital to allow for adjustments in management strategies.

Longer term perspectives

The parties expressed concern that ultimately, opportunities for polar bear conservation are limited by the magnitude and rate of change in climate and sea ice conditions.

The parties were also concerned that their common obligations to protect the ecosystem of which polar bears are a part can only be met if global temperatures do not rise beyond levels where the sea ice retreats from extensive parts of the Arctic. A scientific presentation noted that if sea ice is reduced according to present projections, polar bears are likely to be extirpated from most of their range within this century.

On this background, the parties recognized the urgent need for an effective global response that will address the challenges of climate change. Further, the parties

recommended that ongoing efforts within appropriate fora negotiating strategies to address climate change should be informed of the significance of climate change to the conservation of polar bears.

Habitat protection

The parties reinforced the importance of habitat protection as a means of implementing Article II of the Agreement on protection of ecosystems of which polar bears are a part. Parties also welcomed efforts already undertaken on habitat protection, including protected areas and land and seascape planning.

The parties also recognized that expansion of protected areas can potentially reduce the vulnerability of polar bear populations and the ecosystems of which bears are a part. It was also recognized that protected areas should be designed with consideration of long-term shifts in sea ice conditions that will result from climate change and the overall integrity of habitats critical to polar bear survival.

Contaminants and pollution

The parties expressed concern that long range transport of pollutants into the Arctic environment is shown to affect polar bears. The scope of these effects on polar bear populations are only partially understood, but their impacts on some populations may be significant. The parties also recognized that transport mechanisms may be altered and effects on polar bears amplified as a result of climate change. Comprehensive monitoring and research on the effects of contaminant loads in polar bears, and synergistic effects of contaminants and climate change is therefore important.

The parties recognized the urgent need for an effective global response that will address the challenges of contaminants. Ongoing efforts within appropriate fora negotiating strategies to address contaminants should be informed of the significance of contaminants to the conservation of polar bears.

Activities in polar bear areas

<u>Industrial development</u>

Industrial development continues to expand northward into areas used by polar bears. Several areas of oil and gas interest are identified within these areas. The parties recognize the need to identify key habitats for polar bears and areas in need of protection to establish a basis for land and seascape planning in advance of development. The parties also recognized the importance of having general operating procedures and mitigation measures in place for developed areas. Such measures are in use in the US Beaufort Sea coast oilfields and could provide guidance for other parties. Monitoring

impacts of industrial development on polar bears was considered important as was contingency (emergency) planning. The parties agreed that strict environmental regulations and standards are needed to protect polar bears potentially affected by industrial development.

Shipping

The parties recognized the likelihood of dramatically increased shipping as longer ice-free seasons increase access and open new trans-polar sea routes (Northern Sea Route; transiting the Bering Strait; and Northwest Passage). Potential effects of shipping on polar bears include pollution, noise, physical disturbance related to ice-breaking, and waste. Shipping scenarios and associated impact assessments have been developed through the Arctic Council (Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment). This assessment should be considered by the parties in their work to develop specific mitigation measures, including routing of traffic and other maritime safety measures; to identify monitoring and research priorities; and, to establish contingency plans to minimize impacts from shipping on polar bears.

Tourism and traffic

The parties recognized the value of tourism for economic and education development goals. In some areas, there has been a dramatic increase in the number and range of cruise ships moving further north into areas used by polar bears as open water access has improved. Potential effects of increased tourism include pollution, disturbance and increased risk of defense kills. Actions to address such impacts could include limiting access to sensitive habitats, competence requirements for guides, guidelines and rules for operating in polar bear areas and near polar bears, measures to reduce pollution risks, and post trip reports of wildlife sightings and other activities from tour operators. Polar bear viewing opportunities are expanding in many parts of the Arctic, and the parties recognized the value of Canada's management experience in Churchill.

Safety measures for people and communities

Bear-human interactions will increase due to expanding human populations, industrial development and tourism. In addition, a continued increase in the number of nutritionally stressed bears on land due to retreating sea ice will result in more bear-human interactions. The parties agree on the need to develop comprehensive strategies to manage such conflicts. Opportunities to share techniques and develop strategies have been identified above. Some existing strategies include active deterrence, reduction of attractants, and community education and outreach. Expertise developed for management of other bear species should be consulted in the development of strategies specific to polar bears. The parties agreed to exhange experiences with management of bear-human interactions and welcomed the US offer to lead such an effort in collaboration with polar bear experts and managers from the other parties.

Two specific opportunities identified to develop bear-human interaction strategies are the upcoming workshops in November 2009 in Canada and planned in Alaska in 2010.

Development of plans for action

In light of the growing concern over polar bear conservation in relation to climate change and a number of other emerging issues, such as oil- and gas activities, shipping and tourism, the parties agreed to initiate a process that would lead to a coordinated approach to conservation and management strategies between the parties.

A key aspect of this approach is the recognition that plans for action should be developed at a national level leading up to development of comprehensive circumpolar plans for action that address polar bear conservation.

The process to provide advice to the parties will involve the following steps.

1. Parties request of PBSG an outline or identification of topics that should be included in all national plans for action. Furthermore, PBSG should identify elements that could benefit from international cooperation. The parties recognized an interest in accomplishing this step in 2009.
2. Parties will review and discuss outline material provided by PBSG.
3. Parties will identify and initiate specific topics of general interest (such as bear-human interactions).
4. Parties will identify topics where additional information may be helpful and develop further requests to PBSG as needed.

The parties shared a general expectation that significant progress would be made by the next biennial meeting.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge

The parties recognized that polar bears play an important role in the socio-economical and cultural well being of aboriginal peoples. TEK in concert with western science should be utilized in polar bear management decisions.

Scientific advice

The parties recognized that Article VII of the Agreement calls for all parties to conduct national research programs, particularly relating to the conservation and management of polar bears, and that they shall coordinate such research and exchange information on research programs, results, and data on bears taken. Parties continue to be committed to carrying out research in support of polar bear conservation.

The parties also recognized that the technical support and scientific advice on polar bear conservation provided by the PBSG to the parties supports the 1973 Agreement and is a vital part of the decision making process that the competent authorities should utilize in making their management decisions concerning polar bear conservation.

The parties agreed to ask the PBSG to accept the role of scientific advisory group to the parties and welcomed the offer by the PBSG chair to bring this to the PBSG for their consideration.

Other issues related to the conservation of polar bears

Export and import of polar bear products

The parties noted that the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) is the key regulatory mechanism for export and import in polar bear products and that all parties have adequate statutory authority for CITES. The parties acknowledged the significant progress made by Greenland in its implementation of CITES.

Cooperation in management of shared polar bear populations

Several polar bear populations are shared between parties, and the parties recognized the mechanisms in place for cooperation on the management of these shared populations, and encouraged further development of such cooperation.

Monitoring

The parties welcomed ongoing efforts to monitor status and trends for polar bear populations, and agreed on the need to strengthen monitoring throughout the range of polar bears, and to coordinate and harmonize national monitoring efforts.

Assessing the effectiveness of the Agreement

The parties agreed that a process should be developed to assess the effectiveness of the agreement to achieve its core objectives, and agreed to come back to this at a later biennial meeting under the Agreement.

Commitment to Continued Cooperation

In accordance with the provisions of the Agreement, including Articles VIII and IX, the parties reconfirmed that meetings under the Agreement should be held on a biennial schedule or otherwise as agreed to by the Parties.

The parties welcomed Canada's offer to host the next biennial meeting in 2011 and Russia's offer to host the biennial meeting in 2013, noting that these offers facilitate a multi-year approach to coordinated implementation of the Agreement.

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the parties have agreed to carry out regular, ongoing work leading to the 2011 meeting. Such collaboration would be facilitated by the host of the next meeting informed by the host of the previous meeting.

*** This outcome document is not legally binding and creates no legally binding obligations of the parties to the 1973 multilateral agreement for the conservation of polar bears.