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Interior Reviewed Studies Weighing Risks to Polar Bear

Effort Preceded Protection Proposal

By *Juliet Eilperin*
 Washington Post Staff Writer
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Interior Department officials -- who have maintained for months that they did not analyze how human activities were affecting Arctic warming and endangering polar bears' survival -- completed a review examining studies of this very subject less than a week before proposing that the government list the bears as threatened with extinction, according to the department's own documents.

The "Range-Wide Status Review of the Polar Bear," which is posted on a government Web site, was completed six days before Secretary Dirk Kempthorne proposed adding polar bears to the endangered species list on Dec. 27. It cites several studies on how greenhouse gas emissions are affecting the Arctic, and how cuts in carbon dioxide could slow the pace of warming there. None of those citations made it into the department's final listing proposal.

One section, for example, refers to a 2005 study by NASA scientist James E. Hansen that suggests "the warming trend would change considerably if actions were taken soon enough to keep the atmospheric gases from increasing." By contrast, the listing proposal omits this line and says that when it comes to climate change in the Arctic, "there are few, if any, processes that are capable of altering this trajectory."

Kieran Suckling, policy director for the advocacy group Center for Biological Diversity, said the editing highlights the extent to which the Bush administration is underplaying the connection between climate change and the polar bear's predicament.

"At every single turn the administration has suppressed science on polar bears and global warming, so while this is incredibly disappointing, it's not surprising," Suckling said. "They're deeply afraid the



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A polar bear rests with her cubs on the ice in the Beaufort Sea in northern Alaska. Shrinking sea ice, blamed on Arctic warming, threatens the bears. (By Steve Amstrup -- U.S. Fish And Wildlife Service Via Associated Press)

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Endangered Species Act will create a clear regulatory requirement to limit greenhouse gas emissions."

In late December, Kempthorne and other officials said they believed polar bears deserved federal protection because the sea ice they depend on is disappearing as Arctic temperatures rise. However, Kempthorne emphasized at a press conference announcing the listing that his department did not examine the connection between global warming and shrinking sea ice.

"While the proposal to list the species as threatened cites the threat of receding sea ice, it does not include a scientific analysis of the causes of climate change," he said in his opening statement. "That analysis is beyond the scope of the Endangered Species Act review process, which focuses on information about the polar bear and its habitat conditions including sea ice."

But the status review linked human-generated emissions to Arctic climate change on several occasions and even analyzed whether different government policies were helping ameliorate the problem. One section, titled "Mechanisms to Regulate Climate Change," refers to the Kyoto Protocol and the administration's aim of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and suggests that neither policy is sufficient. According to one document cited, Kyoto's requirement that developed countries reduce their emissions by 5 percent compared with 1990 levels "would only make a small contribution to stabilizing the levels of emissions in the atmosphere."

That language was omitted from the final listing proposal, which instead has a section called "Mechanisms to Regulate Sea Ice Recession" with the sentence, "There are no known regulatory mechanisms effectively addressing reductions in sea ice habitat at this time."

H. Dale Hall, who directs the Fish and Wildlife Service, said in an interview that the status review amounted to "a literature search" in which the authors cited studies without assessing their validity.

"There's not a quality test when you're doing a status review," Hall said. "It's not our analysis."

Hall added that if the polar bear makes it onto the endangered species list, then his agency would ask climate scientists about addressing global warming: "We would ask, 'Is there anything that could be done in the next 45 years that could keep it from becoming endangered?'"

of human-induced climate change.

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