

January 9, 2008

LETTERS

As the Ice Melts, Can the Polar Bears Survive?

To the Editor:

Re “Bearing Up” (Op-Ed, Jan. 5):

In contrast to the arguments made by Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska, the scientific literature is very clear that polar bear survival is highly threatened in the wild.

Because polar bears are at the top of the marine food chain, their bodies accumulate persistent organic pollutants that disrupt their reproductive systems. They are also endangered by a loss of habitat, as energy companies encroach on more and more of their territory for oil and gas operations.

But most important, they are beginning to starve, because the sea ice they depend on for hunting seals, their main food, is melting at a very rapid rate because of global warming.

We must recognize the shortsighted nature of Governor Palin’s appeal not to list the polar bear as endangered. While Alaska is increasingly devastated by global warming — melting glaciers, permafrost and sea ice, as well as the severe impacts on wildlife, ecosystems and people — she seems to be working not to protect the polar bear or ultimately the citizens of her state, but to make sure nothing gets in the way of energy company plans for expansion.

Eric Chivian

Boston, Jan. 7, 2008

The writer is director of the Center for Health and the Global Environment, Harvard Medical School.

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To the Editor:

The argument made by Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska — that the Fish and Wildlife Service should not list the polar bear as threatened under the Endangered Species Act because science doesn’t support doing so — doesn’t persuade.

While Governor Palin correctly describes bear population increases since 1973, when the circumpolar states signed a treaty in response to overhunting, she discounts the mounting evidence that these populations are nonetheless at risk.

Polar bear specialists have shown that diminishing summer sea ice has led to health risks and mortality for the bears, as well as a general population decrease. Some populations could vanish within 100 years.

Though hunting still plays a role and led to a bilateral treaty with Russia, ratified last September, climate change is the major threat to polar bears today.

Governor Palin thinks the proposed listing is a backdoor way of forcing the federal government to change course on global warming policy, but it does no such thing. Instead, it simply seeks to protect bears in the absence of a better national approach to climate change.

If Governor Palin is serious about wanting wildlife policy linked to science, she should examine the studies that her state wildlife officials seem to have ignored. They all say the same thing: polar bears need our help.

James Tierney

Brookline, Mass., Jan. 8, 2008

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To the Editor:

I find it interesting that Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska does not mention that placing the polar bear on the endangered species list would trigger protections that could prevent oil drilling in one of its important habitats, as a Jan. 2 editorial pointed out.

Even at 79 years old and with an admittedly faulty memory, I remember that editorial, but apparently the governor hopes other readers won't remember! Jeanne M. Storm

Chester, Vt., Jan. 5, 2008

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