



# SPORTS AFIELD

THE PREMIER HUNTING ADVENTURE MAGAZINE



**Out of Africa:  
Adventures on  
the Dark Continent**

**The World's Most  
Dangerous Hunt**

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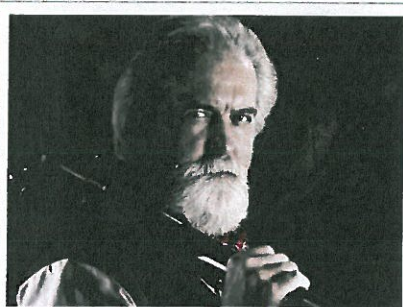
## PROFOUND IMPLICATIONS

*Part 2 in a series examining the polar bear's long journey to the Endangered Species Act.*



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*No one has identified legal hunting as being a driver of even potential declines in polar bear numbers. In fact, neither is the current overall health of polar bear populations worldwide being challenged.*



**Shane Mahoney**

Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is a biologist, writer, hunter, angler, internationally known lecturer on environmental and resource conservation issues, and an expert on the North American Conservation Model.

**T**his is the second article in a series examining the polar bear, its conservation status, and its listing as “threatened” under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s decision to list this species, based upon predictions of climate-change-induced reductions to polar bear habitat, should be viewed as a powerful signal to the hunting community worldwide. Does climate change open a brand new frontier in the debate over sustainable use and hunting’s conservation value?

The Arctic, while often described as a barren and frozen wasteland, is actually a highly diverse ecological region. Encompassing nearly nine million square miles of ice-covered but highly productive ocean, the area is home to a wide range of wildlife species and unique human cultures wondrously adapted to a harsh environment of incredible seasonal extremes. Yet the region and its inhabitants are also highly vulnerable to a growing list of significant social and ecologi-

cal pressures. Today the resiliency of the Arctic system, once considered as intractable and immutable as any on earth, is the subject of intense political and scientific debate. Its future is now certain to be one filled with great change.

No physical feature has figured more prominently in this debate than ice, and no creature more symbolically than the polar bear. Ice lies at the center of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s 2008 decision to list the great white bear as “threatened” under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. In this sense, ice, and more specifically how much of it there will be in the future, is responsible for effectively ending American hunters’ opportunity to pursue the polar bear, to help provide rationale for scientific management of the species, and to contribute to the local Inuit economies surrounding the hunt itself. Climate change is occurring—of this I have no doubt. The question is: How much more secure is this great carnivore now that hunting—an intensely regulated legal activity supportive of scientific wildlife management and local economies—has been set aside? Who wins? Certainly it is neither the hunters nor the Inuit communities themselves.

Furthermore, it is hard to understand how the great bear does either. Certainly we know that polar bears are highly dependent on sea ice, utilizing it as primary habitat for hunting the ringed seals and other marine mammals they rely upon as food. It is also the platform they use to travel, rest, mate, and den. We also know that all five nations in polar bear range (Canada, Norway, Russia, Denmark, and the United States) have agreed that climate change is the greatest threat to this species in the long term. As well, there is considerable,

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though by no means unanimous, agreement that climate change will negatively affect polar bears by inducing changes in the extent, distribution, and timing of sea ice which will, in turn, reduce access to preferred prey species, leading to a decline in polar bear body condition, reproduction, and survival.

Note carefully, however, that hunting is not the issue: it is not the threat. No one has identified legal hunting as presently being a driver of even potential declines in polar bear numbers. In fact, neither is the current overall health of polar bear populations worldwide being challenged.

Indeed, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service clarified for the U.S. District Court in Washington its legal basis for deciding to list the polar bear, it clearly stated that its own research had shown the great carnivore remained a widespread species and was not experi-

encing severe reductions in numbers or range. However, because the Service did accept the argument that incremental loss of sea ice will eventually limit the ability of polar bears to satisfy essential life requirements, they essentially were logically aligned with a further decision to list the species as "threatened," concluding that it was inevitable that the species was in danger of extinction in the foreseeable future.

This is quite a convoluted path to deciding that a healthy wildlife population should be classified today as "threatened" given the many uncertainties with climate model predictions and sea ice forecasts, and the imperfectly understood capacities of polar bears to respond successfully to any changes in habitat that might occur.

Polar bears are not evenly distributed across the Arctic. Furthermore, the numerous regional populations vary in their vital rates and show different movement and distribution patterns that are obviously in response to already existing variations in local sea ice and prey availability. Some polar bear populations currently summer on land near traditional hunting ranges awaiting the seasonal return of the sea ice; some do not. How flexible the animals are in this fasting strategy, and thus in their response to further changes in sea ice distribution is not perfectly understood. This is not to put aside the obvious truth that polar bears, like all animals, have their ecological limits. Nor is it to minimize the responsibility we as hunters have to ensuring these limits are not in any way negatively influenced by our activities.

However, we might remember that many terrestrial species have remained abundant in North America, and elsewhere, despite significant habitat alteration. Our understandings of species and their ecological range of adaptability are surely imperfect. We might also remember that the livelihoods of people are at stake here; and surely the economy of the Inuit people should matter to us as well. Why could not an adaptive management

approach have been taken where ongoing monitoring could have identified when real and agreed-upon numeric thresholds in polar bear abundance were actually being broached, thus leaving open the possibility of some future listing as warranted but preempting any immediate cessation of legal hunting due to an Endangered Species Act listing? Is the legislation simply too inflexible to allow such rational approaches to conservation objectives?

While the hunting community has grown familiar with direct opposition and legal challenges to lawful sustainable use of wildlife, we are far from prepared to deal with challenges that emanate from complex scientific debates surrounding climate patterns that unintentionally yet effectively lead to hunting closures for wildlife species that are, at present, abundant and well managed. Where does this road lead, I wonder?

How was it possible to predict that at some point the U.S. Endangered Species Act, passed in 1973, would combine, thirty-five years later, with an unforeseen debate over the changing world climate to essentially eliminate hunting opportunity for American sportsmen? Perhaps we are entering a new dimension for the hunting debate, one where seemingly unrelated policy decisions, agreements, and legislations will combine, or be deliberately used to restrict hunting even where current wildlife abundance is not threatened by hunting itself nor by the use of the animals harvested in trade or other commercial enterprises.

How we, as hunters, should respond to this is not immediately clear. What is clear to me is that we are entering a future where our old debates about hunting's future may seem mere child's play and our past frustrations far less challenging than the ones that now emerge. Yes, hunting is still strong, but like the polar bear itself, our tradition now confronts the world of global politics in ways we could not imagine. Our entire movement needs to bring its weight to bear, and soon. We too may be standing on thinning ice.



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