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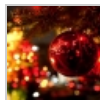
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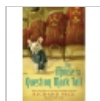
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WORLD

Polar Bears in Peril

Arctic sea ice is melting, making it harder for polar bears to survive in the wild

NOVEMBER 02, 2012 | By Elizabeth Winchester



JOHN BROWN—GETTY IMAGES

Polar bears' features help them survive in the Arctic. A thick layer of fat helps keep the bears warm.

The top of the world is a wintry wonderland. Icebergs float in the cold Arctic Ocean. In winter, the temperature often falls to -30°F and the sun never rises. The ocean is surrounded by frozen ground. There are few people or trees, but to polar bears, the Arctic is home.

Polar bears have thick fur, huge paws and other features that make them well prepared for life in their harsh environment. In fact, they need the Arctic sea ice for survival. But climate change is causing larger and larger areas of summer sea ice to melt. Experts say that if warming patterns continue, the Arctic could be free of summer sea ice by 2050. That may cause two-thirds of the world's 20,000 polar bears to be gone by then too.

"Global climate change may not be affecting you, but it is really affecting polar bears in the Arctic," Jeffrey Bonner, president of the St. Louis Zoo, in Missouri, told TFK. Bonner is working with zoo and aquarium officials across the country to prevent the bears from dying out.

The Importance of the Ice

Polar bears can't survive for long on land. Seals are their main source of food. The bears hunt for seals in openings in the sea ice. Polar bears need the ice to get to their prey. In summer, the polar bears that live on land eat very little and wait for the sea ice to return.

With the sea ice forming later in the year and melting earlier, polar bears do not have enough opportunity to hunt and eat. Less sea ice makes it harder for the bears to catch the seals. The bears must swim longer distances between ice packs, and they can't always make it. The ice is also getting thinner. These conditions can cause polar-bear cubs to become separated from their mothers, who provide them with food.

What Zoos—and You—Can Do

Less ice and snow in the far north is also making the entire planet warmer. Steven Amstrup is the chief scientist of Polar Bears International. The group is dedicated to saving the bears and their habitat. "The more people who see polar bears and understand their plight, the better the chance we'll alter our warming path in time to save them," he says.



RALPH LEE HOPKINS—GETTY IMAGES

Polar bears rely on sea ice as their base for hunting, eating and breeding.

Few people have the chance to see polar bears in the wild. That's where zoos come in. The St. Louis Zoo, in Missouri, is planning a \$20 million polar-bear exhibit, scheduled to open in 2017. The North Carolina Zoo, in Asheboro, plans to open its new polar-bear exhibit late next year. "If you save the polar bears, you are doing something dramatic to help the environment," says Bonner.

While there are obstacles to bringing polar bears into the country, Bonner and others are working to show how rescuing orphaned cubs could help the species survive. Zoos would provide the cubs with a safe home. Experts would work to breed the bears and keep polar-bear populations healthy.

You can do your part, too, by protecting the environment and helping save the bears' habitat. Turn off lights and appliances, and save energy in other ways. "If everybody does small things, that adds up," says Bonner.

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