

Beaufort Sea & Viscount Melville Region Polar Bear-Sea Ice Colloquium

In 2011, the Joint Secretariat (Inuvialuit Settlement Region) organized and hosted a Beaufort Sea and Viscount Melville Sea Ice-Polar Bear Colloquium. The incentive to convene this meeting of ice and polar bear and seal experts was provided by an increasing number of reports in the media and elsewhere, that as a result of the changing northern hemispherical climate, the Polar Bear is in danger of imminent extinction. The main hypothesis behind these reports is based on the assumption that with the current change in climate there is less sea ice which would lead to the decrease and eventual extinction of polar bears as a result is the disappearance of their summer ice habitat, which is also that of their principal prey species –the ringed seal. This colloquium sought to discuss and test this hypothesis.

What are the anticipated effects of climate change to sea ice, polar bears and their prey in the Beaufort Sea and Viscount Melville region?

KEY COMMENTS

- There is much uncertainty amongst the sea ice scientists in their understanding of snow and its effect on sea ice.
- The Canadian Ice Service data set is only 40-50 years deep and cannot be used to predict future sea ice or polar bear habitat.
- Researchers are collaring polar bears in a limited area which does not provide a full representation of the range of the South Beaufort bears and their movement. There is concern regarding using this incomplete data set in models.
- There is a growing inability for non-scientists to process science stories coming from the media. There is much misinformation which inhibits a useful dialogue.

Polar bears are an important part of the Inuvialuit culture and the Inuvialuit have played a pivotal role in the management of this species. In light of a changing climate and emotionally driven political pressures, the Inuvialuit urge that wildlife management decisions ought to continue to be made based on sound science and traditional knowledge, not on emotion and political rhetoric. This colloquium was organized to bring together sea ice scientists with polar bear and seal biologists and traditional knowledge holders to better understand the relationship between polar bears, seals and sea ice in times of a changing climate.



There was consensus amongst the group that polar bears are NOT in imminent danger of extinction in the next 50 years in light of climate change.

PRESENTERS AND PARTICIPANTS

David Barber – University of Manitoba
Andrew Derocher – University of Alberta
Marsha Branigan – GNWT –Environment and Natural Resources
David Douglas – USGS– Alaska Science Center
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Christian Haas – University of Alberta
Lois Harwood – Department of Fisheries and Oceans
John Iacozza – University of Manitoba
David Jackson – Canadian Ice Services
Humphrey Melling – Department of Fisheries and Oceans
Simon Prisenberg – Department of Fisheries and Oceans
Frank Pokiak – Inuvialuit Game Council
Larry Carpenter – Wildlife Management Advisory Council (NWT)
John Cheechoo – Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami
Joint Secretariat Staff

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- There needs to be stable, long term funding and vision for both sea ice and polar bear research.
- There needs to be more collaboration between sea ice scientists, biologist and traditional knowledge holders.
- A collaborative research project should be designed and implemented to gain a more complete understanding of the interactions polar bears, seals and sea ice, especially in the far offshore.
- There needs to be integrated government research efforts.
- Canadian Ice Service should provide daily ice RADARSAT2 information . Standard products should be developed for biologists and managers.
- Improvements are needed in the observational database on how polar bears behave in the sea ice regime.
- There needs to be more research presence in areas that have not traditionally surveyed.
- There needs to be more research on polar bears from the beginning of the beginning the melting season to freeze-up.
- Standardized monitoring protocols need to be developed.
- There needs to be improved communications. Wildlife managers need to tell polar bear researchers what they need to know in order to make management decisions. Polar bear researchers in turn need to ask if they are asking the right questions in their work.
- There needs to be a more balanced story of what is happening to polar bears communicated to the public instead of extreme, emotionally charged sound bits that portray a skewed version of what is actually happening.