

Global Warming, the Arctic and the Polar Bear



This fact sheet is from the Auro Borea section of the polar bear tracker website: a WWF initiative made possible by the support of our Arctic conservation partner Canon. It forms a key part of WWF and Canon's ongoing commitment to reduce global warming and save the Arctic.

The Arctic

The Arctic is a frozen ocean, surrounded by land. Unlike the Antarctic, there is no underlying continent, although it is surrounded by land on which plants grow.

The Arctic is home to polar bears, arctic foxes, lemmings and other animals. Some, such as polar bears, live on the ice for most of the year. This makes the polar bear a marine mammal. Other marine mammals, such as seals, spend most of their time in the water. As there is little vegetation, grazing animals such as caribou, or reindeer, move around throughout the year, following the growth of the plants they live on.

For large parts of the year, the Sun never sets on the Arctic. Similarly, there is a large part of the year where the Sun does not rise. Yet it is inhabited by people, and has been since prehistoric times. The Arctic peoples live a hard life, although new technology is improving conditions for them.

For more information, see:

http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/where_we_work/europe/what_we_do/arctic/area/index.cfm

Polar bears

The polar bear is the largest meat-eating land animal. Its habitat is the Arctic, where it is top of the food chain, eating mostly seals, other small mammals and fish. It spends most of its time on the edges of the ice packs, or frozen seas, where it hunts in the spring and winter. As the southern edge of the sea ice melts in late spring summer, the polar bears retreat. Some polar bears spend their summers on land, fasting and living off their body fat, whilst others retreat with the sea ice and might catch a seal once in a while.

Polar bears are well adapted to the climate in the Arctic. Their skin is black, so it absorbs heat from the sun, and their coat keeps heat close to the skin. Although the fur looks white, this is just a result of the reflection of light. In fact, a polar bear's fur contains no white pigment.

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Polar bears are under threat from hunting and pollution, but the greatest threat to this species is global warming. If it continues as it is, there may be no more polar bears in 100 years' time.

Polar bear tracker

Tracking polar bears tells us about their lifecycles and where and how they travel. It provides valuable information on how they, and the animals they depend on, are affected by weather trends, including climate change, such as global warming and, most importantly, the resulting decline in sea ice.

Scientists track the bears by catching and fitting them with a radio collar. Only females can be tracked, as the males' heads are smaller than their necks, and collars would not stay on for long! Even some of the females manage to lose, or rid themselves of their collars, so tracking them can be a frustrating job!

For more information, see:

http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/where_we_work/europe/what_we_do/arctic/polar_bear/index.cfm

Global warming

Greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, cause heat to be trapped in Earth's atmosphere. As humans burn more fossil fuels more of these gases are produced, and the Earth is getting warmer. This means that the sea ice melts earlier and earlier every year, and the polar bear's hunting ground is getting smaller and lasting for less time.

Fossil fuels are burnt to produce energy, used in our homes and businesses. We could make a huge difference to the rise in the Earth's temperature if we reduce our use of them. But we have to act quickly, before it is too late.

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Some people are not convinced that global warming is really happening, or that it is worsened by human activity. But the evidence is overwhelming, and almost all scientists agree that we have to change our ways.

For more information, see:

http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/what_we_do/climate_change/news/index.cfm



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