

January 5, 2008

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Bearing Up

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Juneau, Alaska

ABOUT the closest most Americans will ever get to a polar bear are those cute, cuddly animated images that smiled at us while dancing around, pitching soft drinks on TV and movie screens this holiday season.

This is unfortunate, because polar bears are magnificent animals, not cartoon characters. They are worthy of our utmost efforts to protect them and their Arctic habitat. But adding polar bears to the nation's list of endangered species, as some are now proposing, should not be part of those efforts.

To help ensure that polar bears are around for centuries to come, Alaska (about a fifth of the world's 25,000 polar bears roam in and around the state) has conducted research and worked closely with the federal government to protect them. We have a ban on most hunting — only Alaska Native subsistence families can hunt polar bears — and measures to protect denning areas and prevent harassment of the bears. We are also participating in international efforts aimed at preserving polar bear populations worldwide.

This month, the secretary of the interior is expected to rule on whether polar bears should be listed under the Endangered Species Act. I strongly believe that adding them to the list is the wrong move at this time. My decision is based on a comprehensive review by state wildlife officials of scientific information from a broad range of climate, ice and polar bear experts.

The Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group, has argued that global warming and the reduction of polar ice severely threatens the bears' habitat and their existence. In fact, there is insufficient evidence that polar bears are in danger of becoming extinct within the foreseeable future — the trigger for protection under the Endangered Species Act. And there is no evidence that polar bears are being mismanaged through existing international agreements and the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act.

The state takes very seriously its job of protecting polar bears and their habitat and is well aware of the problems caused by climate change. But we know our efforts will take more than protecting what we have — we must also learn what we don't know. That's why state biologists are studying the health of polar bear populations and their habitat.

As a result of these efforts, polar bears are more numerous now than they were 40 years ago. The polar bear population in the southern Beaufort Sea off Alaska's North Slope has been relatively stable for 20 years, according to a federal analysis.

We're not against protecting plants and animals under the Endangered Species Act. Alaska has supported listings of other species, like the Aleutian Canada goose. The law worked as it should — under its protection the population of the geese rebounded so much that they were taken off the list of endangered and threatened species in 2001.

Listing the goose — then taking it off — was based on science. The possible listing of a healthy species like the polar

bear would be based on uncertain modeling of possible effects. This is simply not justified.

What is justified is worldwide concern over the proven effects of climate change.

The Center for Biological Diversity, which petitioned for the polar bear to be protected, wants the listing to force the government to either stop or severely limit any public or private action that produces, or even allows, the production of greenhouse gases. But the Endangered Species Act is not the correct tool to address climate change — the act itself actually prohibits any consideration of broader issues.

Such limits should be adopted through an open process in which environmental issues are weighed against economic and social needs, and where scientists debate and present information that policy makers need to make the best decisions.

Americans should become involved in the issue of climate change by offering suggestions for constructive action to their state governments. But listing the polar bear as threatened is the wrong way to get to the right answer.

Sarah Palin, a Republican, is the governor of Alaska.

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