

# A polar bear ban that doesn't bear scrutiny

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**Anthony Speca**

[anthony.speca@polaraspect.com](mailto:anthony.speca@polaraspect.com)

*A proposal to prohibit international commercial trade in polar bears would do little to protect an already well-protected animal further, but much to damage Inuit economic rights and interests.*

Next week, beginning on March 3, the [international community](#) will formally consider a [US proposal](#) to apply the strictest possible controls on cross-border trade in the pelts and other parts of polar bears. If this proposal is accepted, the [not-yet-endangered](#) polar bear will join presently endangered animals—elephants, pandas, whales and so on—listed on [Appendix I](#) of the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species \(CITES\)](#). Trade in “Appendix I species” is permissible only in [exceptional cases](#), such as for scientific research. Trade for commercial purposes is prohibited.

Polar bears are currently listed on Appendix II of CITES, which allows international commercial trade where the exporting country certifies the legality and sustainability of the harvest. About 80% of polar bear products enter the international market from a single country—Canada, which is also [home to a similarly large proportion](#) of the world's polar bears. The US proposal to “uplist” polar bears under CITES looks unavoidably like an implicit indictment of Canadian polar bear management practices.

The Canadian federal government treats polar bears as a [species of special concern](#) under the *Species at Risk Act*. Provincial and territorial governments restrict the polar bear hunt to Aboriginal peoples—particularly Inuit, whose homelands host the majority of the world's polar bears, and who traditionally hunt them for food and fur. To uplist polar bears would essentially be to ban Inuit from earning income from their hunt, either by selling polar bear pelts and other products internationally or—in communities offering a sport hunt—by outfitting and guiding foreigners who purchase quota to acquire trophies. Inuit leaders have [spoken out](#) against the proposal.

In fact, there seems to be little reason for the USA to worry that polar bears will be hunted to extinction to satisfy some unfettered international demand. First, international trade in polar bears is minuscule. As the USA noted in its proposal, CITES data show that only about 700–800 of the worldwide population of 20,000–25,000 polar bears are harvested annually. According to the [Polar Bear Specialist Group \(PBSG\)](#), a part of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, [this harvest is sustainable](#)—at least so far as the [very patchy population counts](#) show, and with exceptions only in a few sub-populations. Only about 400–500 harvested polar bears go on to enter the international market annually in the form of pelts or other products. [Poaching is a problem](#) in parts of Russia, but it is not a general concern in either the USA’s or the PBSG’s view.

Second, as a signatory to the 1973 [Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears](#), the USA is aware that polar bears have enjoyed stringent international protection from hunting for at least four decades. Under the Agreement, the five “range states” with polar bear populations—Canada, Denmark (for Greenland), Norway, the USA and the USSR/Russia—collectively outlawed the hunt except by “local people using traditional means in exercise of their traditional rights.” Given the distribution of polar bears and local people in the Arctic, this means in effect that [Inuit take most](#) of the small harvest.

Third, the 1973 agreement complements [strong domestic controls](#) offering additional protection. Norway completely prohibits killing polar bears except in self-defence, as did the USSR/Russia before [opening an indigenous hunt](#) in Chukotka in 2011. Greenland doesn’t allow sport hunting, and it protects polar bears in a [national park covering nearly half the island](#). The USA itself has banned the import of polar bear products since 2008, when it [designated polar bears as threatened](#) under the *Endangered Species Act*—a move that closed a unique exception in the 1972 *Marine Mammal Protection Act* allowing the import of pelts from legal trophy hunting in Canada.

Finally, insofar as the USA condones the traditional harvest of polar bears by Alaskan Inuit, it presumably understands that Canadian and Greenlandic Inuit will continue to do the same, in accordance with their Aboriginal rights and to the full extent permitted under domestic laws. James Eetoolook, Vice-President of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, has [pointed out](#) that international trade offers Inuit hunters an opportunity to extract additional value from the polar bears they would harvest for food and fur anyway. With pelts now trading at

over \$5,000, and [sport hunters paying](#) about \$20,000 for guide, license and kit, the polar bear hunt can provide much-needed income in some remote Inuit communities.

So what's actually motivating the US proposal to uplist polar bears under CITES? The USA recognizes that the polar bear population is healthier now than it was in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when hunting was mostly unregulated. However, the PBSG forecasts that the polar bear population may decline by 30% or more due to vanishing sea ice, which polar bears need as a platform for stalking seals and other prey. Concerned that climate change could push polar bears toward the brink, the USA argues that international trade simply adds unnecessary further pressure—especially if appetites grow for polar bear pelts and other products.

As a rationale for a CITES uplisting, projecting future declines in the polar bear population due to climate change leaves quite a bit of room for doubt. The international community has [already rejected](#) this line of reasoning once, in 2010, when the USA first proposed uplisting polar bears. Even the CITES Secretariat itself [recommends rejecting](#) the renewed US proposal, stating “An Appendix I listing would not appear to be a measure proportionate to the anticipated risk to the species at this time.” Some prominent wildlife advocacy organizations, such as [Traffic International](#) and the [World Wildlife Fund](#), agree.

But you don't have to discount the PBSG population forecast—or even be a climate-change sceptic—to wonder what value there would be in uplisting polar bears. The issue isn't so much whether climate change threatens polar bears—a seemingly plausible concern at least in the longer term, if climate change isn't halted. Rather, it's whether this threat is effectively addressed by eliminating a tiny international trade in the by-products of a traditional Aboriginal hunt that will continue in any case.

All the same, the EU countries, which [voted in a bloc against](#) the first US proposal, are reportedly [mostly inclined to support](#) the second—despite efforts by [Canadian](#), [Nunavut](#) and [Inuit](#) officials and leaders to persuade them otherwise. With EU member state votes behind the proposal, it stands a good chance of passing. Canada, Greenland and Norway, which lead opposition to it—and the Inuit, who will bear its potentially pointless economic consequences—may be forced to live with a ban that does little to protect polar bears further.

And this is the crucial point. Put another way, the USA is asking the international community to sacrifice Inuit economic rights in order to compensate—or, more accurately, in the somewhat dubious hope of compensating—for environmental damage caused more or less entirely by non-Inuit. If polar bears are threatened, it's because the carbon-intensive industries and lifestyles of Southerners threaten them. Yet as a result, Inuit Northerners will have to forego their own interests in favour of a well-meaning but misguided attempt to manage the consequences.

This story has been told before. After European and American whalers nearly extirpated the bowhead whale from the North Atlantic—not to mention other great whales from the world's oceans—the international community came together first to curtail whaling, and later to ban it outright. Canadian Inuit, who had no responsibility for the slaughter, [had to push Canada hard](#) to recognize their Aboriginal whaling rights. They eventually received a [very strict quota](#) of a single bowhead every two to three years in the eastern Canadian Arctic. This quota is only now being cautiously revised upward to three per year, after the Department of Fisheries and Oceans admitted in 2008 that it had [underestimated the population](#) by an entire order of magnitude. Inuit had long maintained the estimates were too low.

Like the other great whales, the bowhead remains on CITES Appendix I, even though it is [not considered endangered](#) today. The worry is that any renewed international trade in whale products, however small and tightly controlled, would ultimately create consumer demand “detrimental to the survival of the species.” Canadian Inuit sculptors working in whalebone, for instance, cannot sell their art in the major markets of Europe and the USA because no whale products may be legally imported there for commercial purposes.

The US focus on climate change and sea ice notwithstanding, similar fears over the dead hand of the market also appear behind the uplisting proposal. Dan Ashe, an official from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, [told the Canadian Press](#), “When we create markets for rare animals, history tells us that ultimately those markets are difficult to stop once they are established and people are making money.” This seems tantamount to saying that Inuit will inevitably act like the indiscriminate old whalers once did, if they're given the chance to continue earning income from what can hardly be described as a free market in polar bears.

Ashe was probably referring to [research by the Natural Resources Defense Council](#) showing great increases in the number and prices of polar bear pelts marketed over the past five years. In its proposal, the USA also highlighted Nunavut's decision in 2011 to increase the polar bear quota in western Hudson Bay against the advice of the PBSG, but in accordance with Inuit traditional knowledge.

Yet considering how narrowly the five range states limit the harvest, which remains within tolerable levels, there seems no reason to believe that these increases presage a collapse of the conservation ethic among Inuit lured by the prospect of monetary gain. Nunavut deducts even defence kills from total hunting quota—kills that the World Wildlife Fund is sensibly [cooperating with Inuit communities](#) to lessen.

It's difficult to understand, then, what the US proposal to uplist polar bears would accomplish, besides avoidable injury to Inuit economic rights and interests. For its own part, the USA has been careful to ensure that further protection of polar bears doesn't interfere with its own economic interests in oil and gas development off Alaska. When it designated the polar bear as threatened under the *Endangered Species Act*—[under legal pressure](#) from Greenpeace and other environmental organizations seeking to use the legislation to stymie development in polar bear habitat—it [made explicitly clear](#) that its decision would not impose further burdens on energy companies than contemplated under the existing *Marine Mammal Protection Act*.

A cynic might forgivably conclude from all this that the USA is redoubling its efforts to secure a CITES uplisting for polar bears in order to appear environmentally pious while doing little actually to protect polar bear habitat from development, or to rescue the sea ice from climate change. An Inuk cynic might add that the resulting damage to Inuit economic rights is a price the USA and its supporters are willing to see paid.

Some Inuit leaders certainly have taken an archly cynical view. Speaking for Nunavut Inuit on the US proposal, Eetoolook [has charged](#), “There's people in the world that probably want to see the extinction of the Inuit because they hunt animals. Hunting has been our tool to get an income. It's kind of hard being Inuk sometimes when people that don't know anything about wildlife try to tell you you're overhunting.”

Now, Inuit surely don't claim a monopoly on understanding wildlife, though their very deep knowledge of animals is ignored far too often. And probably very few people indeed, if any at all, wish Inuit to go extinct. But given the casual way in which some governments and environmental organizations seem to treat Inuit rights to hunt and profit from the animal resources of their homeland—[seals](#) and whales as well as polar bears—it's hard not to think that they do harbour a kind of wilful blindness to Inuit cultural survival.

*Anthony Speca was a senior policy official with the Government of Nunavut. He now writes and consults on Arctic issues as Managing Principal of Polar Aspect. Follow him at [www.arcticpoliticaleconomy.com](http://www.arcticpoliticaleconomy.com).*