



POLAR BEARS INTERNATIONAL APPLAUDS CONSERVATION EFFORTS OF COLUMBUS ZOO AND AQUARIUM'S POLAR FRONTIER

May 6, 2010 (Columbus, OH): Dr. Tom Smith, a polar bear maternal den expert with Polar Bears International (PBI), a conservation group, attended the grand opening of the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium's "Polar Frontier" exhibit today, which connects guests with northern animals including polar bears, brown bears, and Arctic fox. The new exhibit, Smith said, will help educate visitors on the status of polar bears in the wild and will encourage them to help preserve arctic habitat by cutting their personal carbon footprint.

The Columbus Zoo and Aquarium helps provide financial support for Smith's polar bear research through its Conservation Fund. It also helps fund the field research of Dr. Steven C. Amstrup, another PBI Advisory Council scientist.

Smith, who studies polar bear mothers and cubs in Alaska each spring, said that sea ice loss is affecting polar bear survival. "Outreach by zoos like Columbus can make an enormous difference," Smith said. "The arctic sea ice that polar bears depend on for catching their prey has been declining in both extent and volume, which is causing negative effects on polar bears in some areas. The best science available indicates this will continue because of rising greenhouse gas emissions, and polar bears throughout their range will be affected. If we are serious about conserving polar bears and their ecosystem we need to act quickly."

The Columbus Zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), which recently signed a memorandum of understanding with PBI to work together to develop programs that will engage the public to be part of the solution to climate change

"We have a short time frame to take action on this issue," said Robert Buchanan, president of PBI, "and zoos are a critical educational tool for the survival of the species. 180 million people pass through the turnstiles of AZA-accredited zoos each year – they're people who already care about animals and who are receptive to learning what must be done to conserve them in the wild."

As part of its partnership with PBI, AZA is developing a five-year Initiative that builds on work initiated by the Columbus Zoo and a number of other AZA institutions.

“We are developing consistent messages about climate impacts on wildlife that will ease the confusion many people feel about how Earth’s climate is changing,” said Dr. Paul Boyle, AZA’s senior vice president of conservation and education. “Wildlife is being impacted by these changes, and communicating a consistent message, based on science, can help the national audience visiting AZA zoos and aquariums become part of the solution.”

The Columbus Zoo’s Polar Frontier is a state-of-the art facility, meeting Manitoba Standards, which are guidelines to ensuring a happy, healthy and enriched habitat for polar bears. It also includes scientific data about climate change and shrinking arctic sea ice – the primary habitat of polar bears – in a manner that’s fun and easy to understand for all ages. Most important, the exhibit offers quick tips for changing daily habits to help lower green house gas emissions.

“If our greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, the Earth’s temperature will be higher than it otherwise would have been. Greenhouse gases keep our planet livable by retaining the energy from the sun. More of those gases, however, mean that more solar energy is retained and the earth warms. One of the most obvious consequences of a warming earth has been the decline of arctic sea ice. The recent declines in sea ice availability have been associated with reduced body condition, reproduction, survival, and population size for polar bears,” explained Dr. Steven Amstrup of the U.S. Geological Survey and a member of the PBI Scientific Advisory Council. Links to Dr. Amstrup’s and Dr. Smith’s papers and those of other scientists studying the current and future status of polar bears can be found at www.polarbearsinternational.org.

“The good news is, this is not irreversible, and reaching the large and already interested audience in places like zoos can be an important part of conveying that understanding” added Amstrup.

The Columbus Zoo is part of the PBI network of Arctic Ambassador Center zoos. These centers focus on animal well-being and enrichment, take a leadership role in carbon reduction in their communities, participate in PBI polar bear research efforts, and support polar bear conservation through the PBI Polar Bear Sustainability Alliance.

According to Buchanan, “Zoos also can assist field biologists to better understand aspects of polar bear biology that are not easily observed in the wild. Currently, zoos are engaged in studies of polar bear hearing abilities, physiology, and aspects of reproduction. They’re also on the front lines with educational outreach.”

Buchanan points out that “because most people will never see polar bears in their native habitat; seeing them in zoos can be a very powerful experience. With the help of zoos around the country, we can inspire people to lower their carbon footprint and arrest the climate warming that is causing the arctic sea ice to melt. This will help assure that zoos are not the only places where polar bears will survive in the future.”

Polar Bears International is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the worldwide conservation of polar bears and their arctic habitat through research, stewardship and education.

Scientific data on arctic sea ice and the polar bear status report from the International Union for Conservation of Nature is available at www.polarbearsinternational.org.

Founded in 1924, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, education, science, and recreation. Look for the AZA logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you, and a better future for all living things. The AZA is a leader in global wildlife conservation, and your link to helping animals in their native habitats. To learn more visit www.aza.org.

Media contacts:

Shari Burnett

Polar Bears International, Director of Public Relations

Shari.burnett@polarbearsinternational.org

778.227.6917

Linda Cendes

Association of Zoos and Aquariums

lcendes@aza.org

301-562-0777 x236