

Caution, these images are graphic and due to their sensitive nature should be accompanied by scientific explanation contained in the following copy.

Current images of observed polar bear cannibalism near Churchill, MB:

<http://www.naturalexposures.com/private/polarbearinfanticide/>

Current b-roll video of the polar bears of Churchill available in HD (does not include cannibalism imagery): http://alaskaaerials.com/video/polar_bears_November_2009v3.mov

All photos and video must remain watermarked and credited.



Increased number of cannibalisms observed in Western Hudson Bay polar bears by tourists and wildlife officials

November 27, 2009: Four incidents of adult male polar bears killing cubs for food have been reported to Manitoba Conservation in recent weeks, a grim reminder of the threat to polar bears posed by climate change and their shrinking Arctic sea ice habitat.

Infanticide occurs among all species of bears, but can become accentuated among polar bears when they run low on fat reserves and become hungry enough to resort to cannibalism. Scientists predict that with later formation of ice in the fall and earlier breakup in the spring because of climate warming, polar bears in places like Western Hudson Bay will have to survive on land for longer on their diminishing fat reserves instead of hunting seals on the ice. In this circumstance, adult males are more likely to resort to cannibalism.

The number of observations of cannibalism in the polar bear population near Churchill this year has increased; in past years, Manitoba Conservation has received one-to-two reports per year. One of this year's killings was observed in Wapusk National Park and three inside the Manitoba Conservation Wildlife Management Area, including one witnessed by visitors and staff of Frontiers North's Tundra Buggy® Adventure on November 19th on the coastal trail between Ptarmigan Alley and Gordon Point.

"The last time we observed a male eating a cub in this area was 10 years ago and I recall, in total, three instances in that area in past 24 years," said John Gunter, General Manager of Frontiers North's Tundra Buggy® Adventure.

"At this time of year, polar bears are hungry because they have been surviving on their stored fat reserves since the ice cover of Hudson Bay broke up a few months ago. Thus, days they spend waiting for the sea ice to return, they are losing weight and eventually get quite hungry,"

said Dr. Ian Stirling, an Emeritus Scientist with Environment Canada who has studied the Western Hudson Bay polar bear population for over 35 years. “During the summer and autumn, polar bears lose up to 30 percent of their body mass because they burn up to 1 kg of stored body fat every day while they are waiting for the ice to freeze. We have observed that the average body condition of the Western Hudson Bay polar bears has been declining for almost 30 years. By mid-to-late November, if they can’t get on the sea ice to feed on seals, males may seek out alternate food sources like smaller bears.” Bears of all age and sex classes, when they get hungry in late fall, seek alternate food sources and so become much more dangerous around towns and hunting camps along the coast.”

“Killing of a cub for food by an adult male has also been recorded in Svalbard, in the Norwegian Arctic. And in the southern Beaufort Sea, where the body condition of polar bears has also declined apparently because of deteriorating ice conditions, we have also recorded four cases of cannibalism by adult male bears in the last few years, this time of three adult females and one yearling,” added Dr. Stirling.

The average date of breakup of the sea ice in Western Hudson Bay is now about three weeks earlier than it was only 30 years ago, but there is a lot of variation between years. In 2008, the breakup was later, in early August, so the bears came ashore in better condition than in most recent years. However, with the current delay in freeze-up, this advantage appears to now have been lost. This year may be an even longer wait for the bears to return to the sea ice to hunt as the current long range forecast calls for above average temperatures in the region until the second week of December. Twenty years ago, the average date the bears returned to the ice was November 8; a decade ago that date stretched to November 20.

“While these images are very difficult to look at, we need to remind people that there is hope and each of us can help save polar bears and their habitat,” said Robert Buchanan, president of Polar Bears International. “The Earth now has the highest levels of CO₂ that it has had in 20-million years, long before humans evolved. In simple terms, this is uncharted territory for us. But if humans have caused this problem, we can fix it. This has to begin with a personal commitment to reducing your carbon footprint through daily routines like utilizing recycled materials and saving energy. And then challenge yourself to make an even bigger difference through things like reforestation and encouraging new technology to reduce greenhouse gases, including the increased use of renewable energy sources.”

“In December, the United Nations will meet in Copenhagen to craft a new, comprehensive plan to reduce the world’s carbon footprint. It’s important that we illustrate what we’re observing in the Arctic, including these grisly symptoms and effects of climate change on polar bears, to help bring forth the momentum and political will necessary to create the change we need to prevent irreversible damage to the Arctic,” added Buchanan.

Polar Bears International is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the worldwide conservation of polar bears and their Arctic habitat through research and education.
www.polarbearsinternational.org

-30-

Media Contact:

Shari Burnett
Polar Bears International, Director of Public Relations

Shari.burnett@polarbearsinternational.org

778.22.76917