

Obama versus the Polar Bears

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President Obama's decision comes despite the fact that US government and independent models predict an 80% chance Polar Bears will become mostly extinct by 2050, with total extinction this century without cuts in emissions.

The Obama Presidency hit a new low in the run-up to Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations. One group that were not celebrating are the Polar Bears or their supporters. This is especially ironic, as in early December 2010, a new study published in the prestigious science journal *Nature*, indicated that despite the ominous prospects for the Polar Bears, including possible extinction, the widespread belief that their doom is a forgone conclusion and can't be changed no matter what progress is made on global warming, is incorrect [1]. Nevertheless, as the *Nature* article and similar studies have revealed, saving the Polar Bears would require radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and related stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations on a global scale almost immediately; given the remoteness of this possibility at the present time, the prospects for the Polar Bears - unless immediate action is taken now - are still grim. Thus, now is not the time for complacency but for what the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., called "The fierce urgency of now."

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And yet, almost immediately after the publication of the *Nature* article that raised the possibility of hope for the Polar Bears if immediate action was taken, and right before Christmas, this ray of hope for the Polar Bears was crushed. For the Obama administration, facing a court ordered December 23 deadline to make a determination on the Polar Bears, reaffirmed the stance of the Bush Administration in refusing to upgrade the status of Polar Bears from a threatened to an endangered species under the federal Endangered Species Act. Polar Bears were initially listed in the Act in 2008, despite prominent opposition, notably from then Alaska Republican Governor, Sarah Palin.

Polar Bear activists described the Obama Administration's decision as the equivalent of the President sticking a lump of coal into the Polar Bears Christmas Stockings, not to mention those of Polar Bear advocates the world over.

The Obama administration argued that the Polar Bears were not "on the brink of extinction," despite both the dubiousness of this claim and the fact that the federal Endangered Species Act doesn't require such a determination. This followed an earlier decision in 2009, in which President Obama also reaffirmed a Bush administration wildlife rule issued in its final days in power that the US could not invoke the Endangered Species Act to reduce greenhouse gas emissions threatening Polar Bears. As the *New York Times* (2009) reported at the time, "The action taken...today, and the spin on that action, is every bit as cynical, abusive and antiscientific as the Bush administration," said Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, one of several environmental groups that have sued to challenge the rule.

In these decisions, President Obama appears to be taking a script from former Alaska Governor and Republican Vice Presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, who had earlier argued against even listing Polar Bears as threatened species, lest it minimize oil drilling in Polar Bear habitats. Palin's antics against the bears led some activists to joke that they were heading to Alaska to register Polar Bears to vote in the Presidential election.

President Obama's most recent decision comes despite the fact that according to the US government's own models as well as that of independent researchers there is an 80% chance that Polar Bears will become extinct in much of their habitat by mid-Century and face a possibility of total extinction by century's end, if not before, if current greenhouse gas emissions continue. In the most recent studies, notably the December 2010 article in *Nature* mentioned above, researchers indicated that there were still substantial possibilities of saving the Polar Bear, but only if decisive action was taken.

In the Press Release put out by the Center for Biological Diversity, which along with other organizations had filed court petitions demanding an assessment of the environmental effects of Bush Administration plans for oil drilling in Polar Bear habitats, it was reported that "According to the study, the polar bear faces an overwhelming likelihood of extinction throughout much its range by mid-century and a high risk of global extinction by century's end, if current greenhouse gas emissions continue... According to the study, polar bears in Alaska face more than an 80-percent chance of extinction by 2050 under current emissions trends. However, with stabilization of atmospheric CO₂ levels no higher than 450 parts per million by 2020, combined with the reduction of other forms of human-caused mortality and disturbance such as hunting and oil spills, extinction risk drops to approximately 25 percent."

The *Nature* study's lead author, Steven C. Armstrup, was also the primary author of a series of US Geological Survey Studies in 2007 that reported the Polar Bears faced possible or near extinction, at least in some of its dominant habitats, which could wipe out up to two thirds of all Polar Bears by mid-century, a warning that informed the decision to list the Bear under the Endangered Species Act in 2008 over high level Republican opposition.

These studies came during a period when a lot of media attention was being given to the notion of tipping points from greenhouse gas emissions in the Arctic sea ice, which implied that there might not be any conservation benefits to Polar Bears from greenhouse gas reductions. Amstrup's research team investigated this hypothesis, and their models indicated that the notion that tipping points would mitigate any possible benefit to Polar Bears that came from reducing global warming was incorrect. Of course, such modeling, as the study said, cannot guarantee that real world outcomes wouldn't be different. Nevertheless, Armstrup, who recently retired from the US Geological Survey and now is the chief scientist at Polar Bears International, noted that: "There's a widely held perception that nothing can be done to help polar bears and the arctic ecosystem...Our findings show this isn't true."

The real reasons for the Obama decision were quickly made clear, as right around this same time the Department of the Interior announced new plans for offshore drilling in the heart of the Polar Bears habitat in Alaska. Earlier Bush administration plans for oil drilling in Polar Bear habitats had been overturned by the US Federal Court of Appeals for failing to take into account the potential adverse environmental effects of oil drilling off the Arctic Coast of Alaska. The new Obama Administration plan, as with that of the previous Bush administration, allows for oil drilling in the 30 million acres of habitat in Chukchi sea, home to the Polar Bears.

Obama, in his quest for the Presidency, campaigned with a message of hope and change; but as with so many other persons, apparently this doesn't apply to the Polar Bears, who are on their own. The

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. once said that the arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice. When it comes to the Obama Administration, whether its denying the rights of US survivors of torture, acceding to tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, the pursuit of assassination and aggressive wars, or facilitating the extinction of the Polar Bear, more and more, as many commentators have said, it seems to bend towards injustice (see also Chomsky, 2010; see also Ellis, 2010; see also Center for Biological Diversity, 2007). But for activists concerned with the future of Polar Bears, humanity and the Planet Earth, the only remedy is to take heed of the words of famous Wobbly organizer and martyr Joe Hill, "Don't Mourn, Organize."

To find out more about the Campaign for Polar Bears, see the Center for Biological Diversity website.

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Notes

[1] For contrasting views, see Joe Romm, "Polar Bear, Arctic Sea Ice All But Doomed," December 20, 2010. See also the study cited by Romm in the above piece, by David M. Lawrence, et al., "Accelerated Arctic Land Warming & Permafrost Degradation During Rapid Sea Ice Loss," *Geophysical Research Letters*, Volume 35, June 13, 2008

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P.S.

* <http://www.tni.org/article/obama-versus-polar-bears>

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