

POLAR BEARS

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The Habitat of the Polar Bear

The polar bear is considered to be one of the largest animals that live in the Northern Hemisphere. It was described scientifically by Constantine John Phipps in 1774. The scholar noted that the polar bear should be treated as a separate species because it has some distinct features if to compare with other bears. Phipps was the first researcher who suggested the Latin name *Ursus maritimus* (Polar Bear International, n. d.). It is worth noting that researchers classify the polar bear as a marine mammal due to the fact that their habitat is dependent on the sea-ice surface. The polar bears' range is limited to areas that are covered with ice during the great part of the year; these areas belong to the Arctic Circle. Usually, the polar bears are met in the Beaufort and Chuchi Seas of Alaska, the Kara and Laptev Seas of Russia, the East Siberia, and the Barents Sea. They can be found in the Arctic Archipelago of Canada and the Greenland Sea, as well (Stirling, 1988).

The range of polar bears comprises the territories of five countries: Canada, Denmark, Russia, Norway, and the USA. These countries have signed the International Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears. According to the agreement, these countries are to research and preserve the population of polar bears. It is rather difficult to estimate the exact number of polar bears as the range of their habitat has not been studied properly. Biologists suggest that there are about 20000 to 25000 polar bears in the world that are subdivided into nineteen sub-populations. According to the studies conducted, eight of these sub-populations are declining, one is constantly increasing, three remain stable, and seven need to be researched (Polar Bear International, n. d.; Regehr et al., 2006).

Physical Characteristics

The polar bears can live twenty or thirty years (Wildlife Library, n. d.). An adult male may weight from 350 kg to 680 kg; while an adult female weights around 200-300 kg (WWF Global, n. d.). In Alaska, in 1960, the heaviest bear was recorded to weight approximately more than 1000 kg (USGS: Alaska Science Center, n. d.). The length of males can be up to 300 cm. When such a bear stands on its hind legs, it will be able to reach around 4 m. The length of females is around 240 cm (Polar Bear International, n. d.).

The polar bear has an elongated body. A nose and a skull are long; while a tail and ears are small. The legs are very large and stocky. The feet are rather large to distribute weight while walking on ice or snow and while swimming in water. The claws are short if to compare with the brown bears. The physical characteristics of the polar bear help to maintain the heat of the body. The entire body is covered with fur in order to keep the body from the cold climate. The fur consists of two layers. The first one, under-fur, traps in heat very close to the body; while another one, guard hair, traps heat and repels water. The white fur helps to camouflage in the snowy and icy territories. It can change its shade depending on the weather conditions and becomes yellow with age. In contrast with the white fur, the polar bear's skin is black. The black skin absorbs sunlight, which is necessary for keeping the polar bear warm. It is interesting to point out that the tongue is black, as well. The polar bear has 42 teeth that help to deal with its prey (Wildlife Library, n. d.). The polar bears have a well-developed smell sense that helps to detect a prey at a distance of 1.5 km and at a depth of 1 m. The polar bears have an acute hearing and are able to see at long distances. They are excellent at swimming. The polar bears swim like dogs, using their large paws for propulsion. For instance, some people have witnessed to observe the polar bears as far as 200 km from land. The average speed of swimming is 9.6 km/h; while the average walking speed is 5.6 km/h (Polar Bear International, n. d.).

The Diet

The polar bear is a remarkable member of the carnivorous bear family. Its diet often consists of bearded and ringed seals. While hunting seals, the polar bears use a method called still-hunting. Their sense of smell helps in locating a seal that comes to the ice hole to breathe. The bears approaches very silently to the hole and wait patiently for a seal to appear. It takes the polar bears some seconds to take a seal out of water. They can stalk a seal that rests on the ice, as well. The bears often try to find the lairs that are made by female seals in the deep snow.

The adult bears eat only the skin of seals, which is rather rich in calories; whereas young ones consume meat, which is full of necessary proteins. If there is not enough food, the polar bears can eat everything what they find, for instance, eggs, waterfowl, reindeer, berries, shellfish, small rodents, fish, and kelp. Rarely, they can hunt walrus or beluga whales. The polar bears are able to fast for several months, having no opportunity to hunt seals as the sea-water is not frozen. They use their fat layer reserves during early autumn or late summer (WWF Global, n. d.; Polar Bear International, n. d.). It is worth mentioning that polar bears have a steady habit of cleaning themselves with snow or water just after feeding.

In conclusion, the polar bears have not been studied accordingly. Many questions concerning polar bears have remained unsolved, and a lot of the data have to be proven. The most essential issue is to preserve and try to increase the population of the polar bears.

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