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Polar bear seen in trouble, not endangered

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By Randall Palmer

OTTAWA (Reuters) - The polar bear, a symbol of Canada's far north as well as the effects of climate change on the sensitive Arctic environment, is in trouble, but it is not endangered or threatened with extinction, a Canadian advisory panel said on Friday.

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada gave the polar bear its weakest classification, that of "special concern", but the Canadian government would nonetheless have to develop a management plan to protect the animals if it agrees with the new label.

"Based on the best available information at hand, there was insufficient reason to think that the polar bear was at imminent risk of extinction," Jeffrey Hutchings, chairman of the independent committee said after the panel met in the Northwest Territories.

"That's not to say that it's not in trouble. A special-concern species is a species at risk in Canada and requires legislative action should the government decide to include this species on the legal list."

Canada has an estimated 15,500 polar bears, or roughly two-thirds of the global population. Disappearing summer sea ice is causing a decline in numbers in some areas but other regions are stable and in some the population is rising.

Hutchings said that in addition to global warming, overhunting and oil and gas activity were also pressuring the population of the world's largest land carnivore.

Environment Minister John Baird, who has three months to decide on a response to the committee's report, said the polar bear was "an iconic symbol of Canada" and that Ottawa should not wait until the animal got a "threatened" designation.

"Let's take action now and that's exactly what we're going to do," he told reporters, standing in front of a stuffed polar bear at the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa.

"We don't want to simply wait another five years for another report to say that proactive measures and action is needed. Obviously today's report says we need to do that now."

The stronger "threatened" status, if adopted, would have required prohibitions like bans on hunting and destruction of habitat, but Canada's Arctic Inuit people say restricted hunting should continue.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed listing the polar bear as a threatened species but has declined so far to formally do so. Hutchings said he understood it has postponed its decision till the end of June.

The U.S. Geological Survey said last September that two-thirds of the world's polar bears could be gone by mid-century if predictions of melting sea ice hold true.

The Canadian environmental group David Suzuki Foundation said five of Canada's 13 polar bear populations were thought to be in decline. The western Hudson Bay population declined by 22 percent between 1987 and 2004, it said.

The group called for tougher action to combat global warming in addition to a formal listing under the Species at Risk Act.

(Additional reporting by Louise Egan; editing by Rob Wilson)

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