

First bears and then ...

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

The plight of the polar bear, together with a lawsuit, has forced an admission from the Bush administration: Global warming is real.

The reality-adverse administration has had to come to grips with a hard fact: The bears' icy habitat is melting - and due to climate change. The Interior Department is proposing to declare the bears a threatened species.

This acknowledgment of global warming ought to be the first step of a more aggressive approach to solving the huge problem. The administration must come up with a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Otherwise, Congress must act.

President Bush and his people had been determinedly agnostic about global warming: It may or may not be happening, and if so, perhaps it's due to human activity or perhaps not. More studies are needed.

That agnosticism contrasted with the growing certainty among scientists that, by geological standards, the Earth is rapidly warming, and humans are the culprits.

The proposal to declare the bears threatened meets the terms of a lawsuit settlement with three environmental groups, which argued that the government was shirking its legal duty to respond to the animals' dire plight.

Of course, it's not just these huge, beautiful beasts that are in peril but also their whole ecosystem. One reason for concern is that their plight might presage that of humans.

As summer ice vanishes in the Arctic, bears are becoming scrawnier. They normally swim from one ice floe to another to hunt. As the floes vanish, polar bears in Alaska have been spotted engaging in long-distance swimming in search of nourishment - an ordeal that claims some lives. Other bears have resorted to cannibalism to survive. And cubs are dying at a higher rate than normal. Would global warming have such an impact on humans? Who knows? But the possibility can't be ruled out.

Already, the warming has affected a tiny human habitat, the western Alaskan village of Newtok (population 321), where, according to The Associated Press, melting permafrost is contributing to flooding, which is forcing the village to move, although it now lacks the wherewithal to do so.

Just declaring the polar bears threatened, a level below the "endangered" designation, could trigger action. Because global warming is the cause, U.S. industries could be forced to reduce their output of greenhouse gases. In any case, the Bush administration must become proactive and come up with an aggressive plan for curbing global warming.

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