



Polar Bear

Ursus maritimus

Description: Polar bears are the largest bear species, weighing in at between 440 and 1,760 pounds with an overall body length of 8' 5".

They have a distinctive all white coat, triangular profile, long neck, and small ears. A polar bear's nose, lips and all skin under their fur is black. Their front paws are very wide for paddling through arctic waters, they use their hind feet as rudders. The soles of their feet are covered with vacuoles that actually act as suction cups while walking (and running) on the ice. Their heavy fur, dense underfur, and thick layer of insulating fat allows them to maintain a normal body temperature when the outside temperature drops to -37 degrees Centigrade.

Range: It is found in Greenland, Norway, the former Soviet Union, Canada and Alaska.



(Range map is a view from above the north pole.)

Habitat: Polar bears are found in the areas of annual ice that forms around the shorelines of the continents and archipelagoes at the circumpolar Arctic. This area has the highest concentration of food sources available, as compared to more northern latitudes with multiyear ice which is biologically more barren and where polar bears are rarely found.

Diet: Polar bears are almost exclusively carnivores, feeding on ringed and bearded seals, young walruses and occasionally a narwhal or beluga. They have been known to eat carrion and may occasionally eat berries or other plant material when available.

Social Organization: Polar bears are usually solitary animals except for females with cubs. Polar bears each have large home ranges but they do not defend particular territories. At sites of particular food abundance, such as dump sites, several polar bears may feed in close proximity but with little interaction.

Reproduction: Females become sexually mature at between 5 and 6 years old. Polar bears mate between March and May with a delayed implantation occurring in September or October. A litter can consist of up to four cubs but that is extremely rare with little chance of all cubs surviving. One or two cubs is much more common. The cubs will remain with their mother for up to two and a half years.

Conservation Status: Polar bears are listed as Appendix II in CITES. Polar bears are the only bear species with international protection.

Threats to Survival: Threats to polar bear survival are mainly of an environmental nature, such as massive oil spills and accumulative toxins in their food supply. As more countries begin to look to this region for oil and gas deposits, these problems may become accelerated.

Zoo Programs: A Species Survival Plan© and regional studbook are maintained on these animals. Zoos are being encouraged to emphasize the importance of the polar bear's delicately balanced ecosystem in their conservation message.