

Polar Bear Management Plan for Québec, the Eeyou Marine Region and the Nunavik Marine Region



Nunavik

Contact Information for Members of the Consultation Group

Primary Contact:

Gregor Gilbert

Senior Resource Development Department Coordinator
Makivik Corporation – Resource Development Department
(514) 745-8880
ggilbert@makivik.org

Other Members:

Mark O'Connor

Resource Development Coordinator
Makivik Corporation – Resource Development Department
(514) 745-8880
moconnor@makivik.org

Jimmy Johannes

Executive Secretary
NHFTA / RNUK
(819) 964-0645
secretary@rnuk.ca

Guillaume Szor

Biologiste, MSc
Direction de la gestion de la faune du Nord-du-Québec
Ministère des Forêts de la Faune et des Parcs (MFFP)
(418) 748-7701 ext. 238
guillaume.szor@mffp.gouv.qc.ca

Section 1: Introduction

For as long as Inuit and Cree have inhabited the coastal region of Northern Québec (Nunavik and Eeyou Istchee) polar bears (*Nanuq* in Inuktitut, *Whabhskewh* in Cree) have been an important part of their cultures and livelihood. Inuit have used polar bear for food and clothing for millennia; the Crees of Eeyou Istchee, although less reliant on polar bear than the Inuit, also place a high value on polar bears as socio-cultural symbols. Accompanying these traditional usages and views have been traditional harvest management practices that largely remain in place to this day.

On January 10, 2012, the Federal Minister of the Environment requested that the Nunavik Marine Region Wildlife Board (NMRWB) establish a management regime, including a Total Allowable Take (TAT), for the three sub-populations of polar bear that occur in the Nunavik Marine Region (NMR). Given the distribution of polar bears and the jurisdictional complexities of Northern Quebec, it is desirable and practical to have a single management plan that applies to both the onshore portion of Quebec and its adjacent marine regions (the Nunavik Marine Region and the Eeyou Marine Region). This plan is therefore intended to encompass the territories covered under three Land Claims Agreements; the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement (JBNQA), the Nunavik Inuit Land Claims Agreement (NILCA) and the Eeyou Marine Region Land Claims Agreement (EMRLCA); it will not apply beyond the boundaries defined in these Agreements.

From January to March 2017, members of the Quebec – Eeyou Marine Region – Nunavik Marine Region Polar Bear Management Plan Working Group (i.e. RNUK, Makivik, Environment and Climate Change Canada and the Quebec Government) visited all of the 14 Nunavik communities to ensure that Inuit have been given an opportunity to share their views and knowledge about polar bear management. In each community the group met with key local organizations (Northern Villages, Landholding Corporations, and LNUKs) and with the public (via public meetings, FM radio, or both). A separate process was held with Inuit living in the Cree community of Chisasibi during September 2017.

Communities received copies of the draft management plan prior to the consultations. The plan provided an overview of the legal context and of the existing knowledge on polar bears, their habitat and the threats they face (based on both science and traditional knowledge). Communities were asked to provide their views on polar bear management based on the main themes outlined in the Consultation Guide (i.e. components of a co-management system, knowledge gathering, wise-use and stewardship and the relationship between Inuit and polar bears).

The input of Inuit communities has been summarized within the present document and will shape the management decisions and processes that flow from the Plan. This summary is not exhaustive and several important elements of the consultation are not included herein. In order to preserve the full range of opinions expressed, the community-specific consultation reports are appended.

Section 1: Feedback Received

General comments about the management plan

The communities were generally pleased that consultations were taking place this early in the process. Most felt that the plan could become a useful tool for Nunavik Inuit as it will help to ensure that polar bear hunting can continue for many generations to come. A good plan needs to be focused around the needs and concerns of Nunavik Inuit, be inclusive of their knowledge and should not focus solely on establishing hunting quotas. While managing polar bear is important, the paramountcy of the land claims agreements must not be overlooked or compromised at any stage of this process.

Many participants felt that a 10-year lifespan for the plan was too lengthy, given the pace of change (e.g. climate change, size of communities, etc.) within the region. Instead, they felt that a 5-year plan would be more appropriate. Some also indicated that the success of the management plan depends on the creation of a strong implementation plan, including an effective communications plan.

Questions related to Objective 1: [Establish a management system based on the best available information, and adapt it as necessary, in order to ensure the long-term persistence of healthy polar bears in the management plan area.](#)

The 1984 Agreement between Anquvigaaq and the Quebec Government

Many participants were unaware that these regulations existed, or unfamiliar with them. Overall, participants felt that the 1984 Regulations were a good platform to build on but that some tweaks were likely needed.

The closed season during summer was one of the main point which raised several comments. While some communities agreed with a closed season during summer considering that hides are in poor condition at that time of year, several communities indicated that there should not be a closed season imposed for multiple reasons. First, during the summer season, this is when many communities see more polar bears. Their meat also taste usually best in the summer. The high abundance of bears in the summer on the islands where eiders, mures and other bird colonies are nesting are having a eating lots of their eggs and having a negative impacts on the bird populations.

There was general agreement that females with young cubs should not be hunted and that females in their dens should not be harassed; there was support for these conditions to be maintained in the future. That said, there were a lot of questions about harvesting young bears (2-3 year-olds, slightly smaller than the mother) since these are preferred for eating. Most felt that it was important to retain the right to hunt those young bears for food.

There was a strong consensus across the region that polar bears should not be relocated to zoos. Many participants recalled personal experiences visiting southern zoos and expressed a desire never to see this again. These positions were generally based on the treatment received by polar bears (e.g. unnatural housing facilities, behaviours, feeding routines, etc.), which were considered to demonstrate a lack of respect these animals. Many felt that the language in the 1984 Agreement on this matter should be strengthened and that orphan cubs be killed as a humane alternative, rather than sending them to a zoo.

The right to sell polar bear skins to the international market

While there wasn't unanimous support, most people felt that it was important to retain this right as it can provide much needed income for some hunters. It was noted that implementing a central purchasing system, such as the one operated by the Nunavut Government would be useful.

In the past, polar bears were hunted as a valuable resource and all the meat and fur was used to their full potential. With the arrival of the Hudson Bay Company and the market for polar bear furs, things changed and there has been a decrease in the consumption of meat and traditional use of the skins. There is a need to ensure that the market for skins does not become the driver for polar bear hunting, resulting in wasted meat. Polar bear meat must remain the main reason to kill a bear. This continues in many communities, where skins are only sold opportunistically and as a by-product of a subsistence hunt.

Several participants felt that it was important to promote alternatives rather than seeking only to sell the skin (e.g. traditional clothing, transformed products, etc.), especially considering that the current market price of polar bear skin is fairly low.

Sport Hunting

There were mitigated views about the eventuality of a sport hunt in Nunavik. Some communities were strongly opposed to the idea while others felt that it would provide alternative source of income for hunters, so long as it was structure within a strict framework. On the other hand, there were concerns that a sport hunt would lead to stricter regulations for subsistence hunters, or that this would lessen harvesting opportunities for Inuit hunters. The means by which sport hunting could be conducted (i.e. dog sled vs. snowmobile) was also debated, since there are no dog teams in some communities and allowing only dog team owners to conduct sport hunt might be unfair to the rest of the community.

Regulation of the harvest

Total Allowable Take / Quota

Across the region, the single biggest concern regarding the management of polar bears was that it would lead to the implementation of a quota. Past experiences with the beluga harvest have shown that the establishment of a quota will seriously alter the culture and traditions of Nunavik Inuit.

Quotas change the way hunting occurs by creating a sense of urgency among hunters, who feel that they need to rush to get their bear before the quota runs out. Hunters who would not normally go out seeking polar bears will begin to do so, leading to increased harvesting pressure and preventing "real" polar bear hunters from hunting. Imposing limits also alters the traditional sharing practices, with many hunters becoming more secretive about their hunts. Quotas will also lead to selfishness and conflict within and between communities, as is the case for beluga.

The allocation of quota between regions (i.e. Nunavut, Nunavik, Labrador) and between communities must be equitable. Many felt that the Guaranteed Level of Harvest described in the JBNQA must not be forgotten in all of these discussions to limit the hunt. There is a need to ensure flexibility in the quota system, between communities and between years.

Non-quota limitations (i.e. tags, sex-selective harvest, etc.)

Several comments were raised about the importance of hunting both males and females to maintain a healthy and balanced bear population (the example of the caribou sport hunt is often used to illustrate this point). The males are as important as the females to maintain the population and the fact that Inuit have not practice a sex-selective harvest in the past is believed to be the reason that the bear population has increased. Furthermore, considering that it is hard to tell the difference between small males and females the implementation of a sex-selective harvest would be difficult. On the other hand, some participants mentioned that due to the fact that buyers prefer the bigger, male, hides, there is already, in a way, a sex-selective harvest taking place.

Having a restriction on the calibre of rifle used to hunt polar bears was usually supported. Although it is possible to kill a bear with a low-calibre rifle, it was generally agreed that no one should shoot a bear using a .22 or a shotgun loaded with something other than slugs since this generally only injures the bear. Minimum calibre suggested were usually .223 or .243. The importance of marksmanship and shot placement training, especially in youth, was also mentioned to make sure that bear are killed on the first shot. Any limit on the calibre of rifle should not apply to defense of life and property.

Questions related to Objective 2: Collect traditional and scientific knowledge of polar bears to inform management decisions:

Health and abundance of polar bears

The view of polar bear health was consistent across all three sub-populations; Nunavik Inuit felt that polar bears were healthy. The majority of bears hunted in Nunavik have been fat, with very few thin bears having been observed (all seasons combined).

Although polar bear numbers remain low in some communities (especially those situated far from the coast), nearly all respondents reported that the number of polar bears has increased significantly since the 1950's and 1960's when polar bears were a rarity. Polar bears numbers remained quite low into the 1980's, when their numbers began increasing. Whereas polar bears used to be heard of only in stories, today it is the norm to see several bears while out on the sea ice, especially on islands or on the water during the ice-free season. It was reported that the elders had previously witnessed a population cycle for polar bears so it is expected, and normal, that populations will decline in the future.

Reproductive rates are another indication that bears are doing well. According to one participant, in the past females rarely had more than one cub, they are now routinely observed with multiple cubs, including triplets.

Polar Bear research methods

Research planning

Few people were familiar with research methods and many felt that there was a lack of feedback provided to them once studies are finished. That said, it was widely accepted that it is important to conduct regular scientific monitoring of the region's polar bear populations. However, there was also an expression that such research must be designed with input from Inuit hunters who spend significant time on the land and base on Inuit Traditional Knowledge. With careful design and input from all parties, the results will be more widely accepted. Since the results of these surveys have such major and direct impact on communities, it is important that they be designed

correctly. It is important that hunters familiar with the survey area be on-board helicopters/aircraft during surveys since they are intimately familiar with their hunting grounds.

The importance of covering islands and open water when doing surveys during the summer and fall was raised multiple times because of the high number of bears using those areas. The need to also cover inland areas was expressed, especially around Arctic char rivers or where there is remnant snow, across the peninsula between Ungava and Labrador, and between Puvirnituk and Inukjuak. Bears are known to spend a lot of time inside caves during the summer, so it is important to have multiple passes over islands with caves, since the bears may not be visible on the first pass. It is also common for bears to hide when they hear an engine, this could also bias survey results. Since there are most bears around at that time, some people felt that a winter survey would be best. However, most communities agreed that it was acceptable to conduct summer surveys, as long as there was complete coverage of the area. The need to explore alternative survey methods (e.g. by boat or snowmobile) was raised in several communities.

Use of tranquilizers

There was strong opposition to using tranquilizing agents during the conduct of scientific research, especially during massive mark-recapture efforts that aim to capture as many bears as possible. Inuit want to see the moratorium on drugging polar bears in northern Quebec maintained and extended to the Nunavik Marine Region. There was particular concern expressed about the health of bears that have been captured multiple times. The meat of bears that have been tranquilized is not eaten, so this leads to wastage of polar bear meat. The liver of bears that have been tranquilized is different than a healthy bear. Some felt that research in which bears are handled should be coupled with a compensation program for hunters who are forced to waste the meat (though this should be approached cautiously to avoid collared bears becoming a preferential target). Limited support was expressed by some participants in situations where it is absolutely necessary or if it is done on old bears since those are usually not eaten.

Collaring

Collaring also received very little support by Nunavik Inuit. Although the usefulness of collaring data was acknowledged in some cases, most felt that the impacts on polar bears were too important for this practice to take place. One specific concern was that the collar impedes the hunting success of polar bears by limiting their ability to plunge their necks down a seal hole; it takes them more attempts before successfully landing a seal. Several participants indicated that collared bears were observed to be skinny compared to other bears. A few participants suggested that ear-tag transmitters be used instead.

Community-based monitoring

Participants felt that hunters could contribute more to knowledge gathering, either by recording their observations or by providing samples to help researchers in their work. This would require clear communication, open-minded researchers without preconceived ideas about Nunavik and a detailed protocol for sample collection and handling.

Questions related to Objective 3: Encourage wise use and stewardship of polar bears:

Concerns regarding the future of polar bears

Nunavik Inuit were not particularly concerned about the future of polar bears and recognize that they are highly intelligent animals that can think like humans and are able to adapt to any situation. There is concern among the communities that the wrong message is being given to the International community about the status of bears and that Inuit will suffer as a consequence.

The relationship between Inuit and polar bears

Polar bears continue to be highly revered by Inuit and many participants did not feel that the relationship has changed. Others, however, felt that there has been a change and that it is mostly due to the fact that the nature of hunting has changed. Whereas in the past a polar bear was an important factor in food security, there are now many other options so they are not “needed” as they were during times of famine. This relationship began changing when the first fur traders arrived to Nunavik and offered money or goods in exchange for polar bear skins.

As more people become detached from the land (i.e. stop being full-time hunters) there is a loss of familiarity with polar bears which results in more people not knowing how to read their behaviour or how to react to them. Many communities stated that there were very few “real” polar bear hunters today and that most polar bears are harvested opportunistically nowadays or often for pride and community status by youth. As mentioned previously there was significant concern that implementing a quota as part of the management plan would have major impacts on the relationship between Inuit and polar bears. This change has already been observed in communities where voluntary limits have been imposed in recent year, creating conflicts between Nunavik communities and resentment against Nunavut communities when feeling treated unfairly.

Hunting practices / Use of polar bears

Polar bear meat is still consumed widely in many Nunavik communities, but in others it is only the elders who consume it. Because there was a long period with no bears, many people do not know how to prepare the meat nor which parts of the polar bear are even edible. It was reported on a number of occasions that polar bear liver should not be eaten. Some elders suggested that communities who hunt many bears should send meat to those communities that do not get many.

It was acknowledged in different communities that the availability of modern hunting equipment (hunting gear, snowmobiles, etc) has impacted the way Inuit use and hunt polar bears. Concerns were raised at multiple occasions about the way that youth threats wildlife, not only polar bears but also caribou and belugas, often wasting the meat or harvesting lots of animals for the money they can get by selling the meat in the community or through hunter support programs. The importance of the transfer of knowledge between elders and the younger generation on proper hunting practices has been pointed out. It was also mentioned several times that hunters must make sure that the polar bear is aware of their presence before trying to kill it, and that hunters take great care in making sure that they will kill the bear with their first shot.

As the price of polar bear furs went up, local use of the hides declined. Many participants felt that there should be a concerted effort to use skins and other polar bear parts to make clothing, jewelry, handicrafts, etc. Some communities reported that there was a lack of knowledge about how to take proper care of polar bear hides in order to maximize their value, indicating that they should not be skinned like seals or wolves. That many buyers

are now willing to purchase raw skins has contributed to the loss of knowledge among women with regards to scraping and drying skins.

Transmission of knowledge

Several communities indicated the need for educational programs aimed at transferring traditional knowledge of polar bears to younger generations. In the past, children gained general knowledge about polar bears through story-telling and learned proper hunting practices from their fathers. Developing a booklet or video about this could help to preserve the knowledge.

Others recommended the creation of a culture committee to teach the youth about traditional practices, how to take care of the hide and how to use it to make clothing, how to cook polar bear meat, etc. It was proposed that the Nunavik Research Center could also play a role in educating the youth about wildlife.

Interactions between polar bear and other species

For some communities, the impact of polar bears on eider duck colonies was a significant concern. This is particularly true for Ungava Bay communities who have witnessed major declines in their eider colonies, to the point where it is no longer feasible for some communities to collect eider down. Although the phenomenon appears to be less prominent in Hudson Bay, several colonies there have also been heavily impacted.

Another concern that was evident in many areas has been the decline of ringed seal populations, attributed by many participants to the increase in polar bear numbers. Because ringed seal is a staple in the Inuit diet, polar bears are seen by some as a risk to the food security of Inuit communities.

Finally, there are concerns about the widespread and increasing presence of black bears in the region, most of which are related to human safety. There have also been recent observations of interactions between black bears and polar bears (e.g. when they are both feeding on arctic char). These have sparked questions about whether the two species can interbreed, and whether disease transmission is possible.

Questions related to Objective 4: Establish strategies to minimize the effects of human activities on polar bears and their habitat, without compromising public safety

Development and Industrial Activity

Because most development (e.g. Raglan Mine, Canadian Royalties, etc.) that has occurred in Nunavik has been far from the coast and away from key polar bear habitats, they were not generally viewed as a major concern. That said, a number of communities felt like they weren't given enough say as to how their lands should be developed. The Ottawa Islands were identified as an area where no development should occur due to their importance for polar bear.

The shipping activities related to the mines (and other sectors) were of significant concern throughout the region since they occur in and around critical polar bear habitat. Many felt that ice-breaking should be prohibited, since it has direct (e.g. disturbance) and indirect (e.g. local depletion of ringed seals, impact on sea ice composition, etc.) impacts on polar bears. Aside from the ice-breaking activities, the disturbance associated with the increased shipping and industrial activities around communities was also mentioned as a possible cause explaining the observed decline in ringed seal abundance. Oil spills associated with shipping were also of

concern to Nunavik Inuit. Some have suggested that there should be Inuit observers on board all vessels navigating through the region.

Tourism

Non-consumptive tourism was generally viewed as an acceptable means of drawing economic benefits into Nunavik communities (though some participants objected to it based on Inuit values, and because of the problems that stem from this type of activity). However, there is a need to provide a well-defined framework around tourism to ensure that bears are not harassed or killed and that tourism does not impede subsistence harvesting. Tourism should also be restricted to specific areas to avoid critical habitat (of polar bear or other species) or dangerous areas.

Pollution/Contaminants

Several people mentioned that they were concerned about the effects of pollution on polar bears, as well as on the quality of polar bear meat. Because bears are more frequent at dump sites, there is a need to factor them into the design and location of dump sites. Others have observed plastic bags or other garbage in polar bear stomachs. Some participants felt that community-led initiatives to remove trash from beaches would help in this regard.

There was generally a feeling that very little information was shared with Inuit concerning contaminant loading and impacts of pollution in polar bears.

Parasites & Disease

There were not many concerns expressed regarding parasites and disease, although a few communities reported seeing dead polar bears and felt that it would be useful to develop a protocol for documenting/sampling such bears. Others felt that the Nunavik Research Center should play a larger role with regards to disseminating information about polar bear diseases and parasites, best practices for handling dead bears, what to look out for, etc. A few participants were not aware that eating raw polar bear put them at risk of exposure to *Trichinellosis* and felt that better communication about this was necessary.

Climate Change

Inuit recognized that the region has been subject to significant changes as a result of climate change over the past 20-30 years. They know that winters are shorter and that the ice has changed. Despite this, most participants disagree with the scientific predictions that polar bears will disappear because sea ice is melting and feel that these claims are exaggerated and fail to take into account the intelligence of polar bears.

Several participants felt that the threat to polar bears will be due to the decline in ringed seals (because they can build dens when no snow on sea ice) rather than due to an inability to hunt them. Bears are able to hunt seals in open water, they are also known to eat beluga and walrus during summer. They've also started exploiting alternative food sources including duck eggs, arctic char and caribou (some also reported that beavers can be taken by polar bear). Some participants did however mention that the longer ice-free period was a concern for bears and that bears now have to eat much more while they are on the land in summer before they can get in their den.

One participant suggested that climate change has actually benefited polar bears since winters are now shorter and warmer than in the past. The bears therefore need to consume and expend less energy in order to survive.

Defense of Life and Property:

By far one of the most salient points raised during consultation, defense life and property was debated at length in all communities. The increase in polar bear numbers, combined with reductions in sea ice have led to increased frequency of encounters between Inuit and polar bears. Although some communities were relatively sheltered from this problem (because they are located inland), it was a daily occurrence for others located near the migratory path of polar bears. Because bears appear to be less afraid of humans than in the past, many felt that this problem will only get worse in the future.

The importance of retaining the right to kill dangerous polar bears within the management plan was clearly expressed. A vast majority of participants had first-hand experience dealing with problem bears, including a number of whom who'd had life-threatening experiences.

The danger posed by polar bears deters many Inuit from camping at traditional hunting and fishing sites, unless they are in a cabin. Cabins are subject to significant damage by polar bears (as well as black bears) and most Inuit do not have the financial capacity to repair them every year. Polar bears often raid food caches and destroy foods that take significant time and effort to prepare (e.g. fermented walrus, fermented beluga fat, etc.). In many cases these cannot be replaced and the impacts are long-lasting.

There was widespread support for the implementation of a program (regional program, complimented by local plans) aimed at ensuring the safety of Inuit and potentially avoiding the take of problem bears. This could serve to make deterrents more readily available for anyone who is planning to go out on the land. A compensation program similar to Nunavut's could help to offset the financial impacts of damage to cabins and other hunting equipment. A deterrence program could also be a means to teach best practices on matters such as knowing how to prevent bears from coming into town/camp, which bears are dangerous and how to react when a polar bear is around. Where polar bears frequently enter the community (e.g. Ivujivik), it would be beneficial to hire full-time polar bear monitors.

A few participants felt that problem bears should be relocated, as in Churchill, while others felt that they should be killed immediately in accordance with traditional values.