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Protect us, not polar bears: Inuit officials

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Nunavut Inuit who do not want polar bears listed under Canada's Species at Risk Act say they should be the ones being protected from the Arctic bears.

Speaking Wednesday before the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB) in Iqaluit, Inuit elders and officials voiced their opposition to a proposal by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) to have the polar bear listed as a species of special concern in Canada.

"We have to listen to our communities, we have to listen to Inuit, and we get our direction from Inuit and also from our executive," said Paul Inngaut, a wildlife adviser with Inuit land-claims organization Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.

"Our executive does not support the listing, and that's what we relate to [the] NWMB."

Soliciting feedback

The polar bear was last classified as a species of special concern -- one step below threatened and two below endangered -- in 2002.

COSEWIC, an arm's-length federal scientific advisory committee, recommended the same status for the species in 2008. The federal government has to give a final decision on whether to approve that status.

Scientists on the committee argue that although Canada's polar bear population has improved over the last 50 years, the species' future could be threatened by climate change and receding sea ice.

But one by one, Inuit representatives on Wednesday spoke of the threats polar bears pose to people in Nunavut communities -- from bears breaking into cabins and destroying hunting equipment to bears mauling people to death.

Demanding compensation

Some Inuit even said polar bears have been stealing seals from sealing nets by pulling the nets out of the sea ice.

Delegates at the hearing demanded compensation for lost equipment and destroyed cabins -- something the Nunavut government says it is working on.

"We've been directed to have these in place by the new fiscal year," said Chris Hotson, the territorial government's assistant director of wildlife management.

"So between now and then, we'll be talking with communities, and getting your input, on how we can work this."

The Nunavut Wildlife Management Board is required, under the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, to solicit feedback from Inuit when wildlife regulations are under scrutiny.

The polar bear hearings conclude on Thursday with final submissions. The wildlife board will then be expected to prepare its own position on the COSEWIC proposal by early July.

The board will submit its recommendations to Federal Environment Minister Jim Prentice, who will have 60 days to respond.

"We, too, are worried about polar bears in the future because climate change, it's a huge thing. It's not only going to affect the polar bears, it's going to affect us, so we are concerned too," said Irngaut.

"But we feel that at this time, the polar bear is really being used to combat climate change, and we don't agree with that."

CBC News

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