

The Washington Times

May 15, 2006

Polar bears on thin ice?

By H. Sterling Burnett

Polar bears are cute. Just ask the marketing executives at Coca-Cola which used animated polar bears to hawk their wares in recent years. Bears, pandas, lions and elephants are "charismatic megafauna" -- meaning basically cute animals that people care about. If you want to sell a product, or a cause, just tie it to one of these animals and you've got the attention of millions of people; kids and adults alike.

Thus, environmental alarmists have made much of research claiming the Arctic's great white bear faces extinction from human-caused global warming. Snails, snakes and spiders withering in the sun just don't pack the same emotional punch as a cuddly, furry polar bear slipping beneath the melting ice.

Fortunately, a new study by David Legates, director of the University of Delaware's Center for Climatic Research, throws cold water on the claim global warming threatens polar bears survival.

Mr. Legates critiques the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment that proclaimed Arctic air temperature trends

strongly indicate global warming, causing polar ice caps and glaciers to melt. However, Mr. Legates says, the Assessment ignored data that undermine these claims.

For example, coastal stations in Greenland are cooling and average summer air temperatures at the summit of the Greenland Ice Sheet have decreased by 4 degrees Fahrenheit per decade since measurements began in 1987. In addition, records from Russian coastal stations show the extent and thickness of sea ice has varied greatly over 60- to 80-year periods during the last 125 years. Moreover, the maximum air temperature they report for the 20th century was in 1938, when it was nearly four-tenths of a degree Fahrenheit warmer than the air temperature in 2000.

Ice core data from Baffin Island and sea core sediments from the Chukchi Sea also show that even if there is warming, it has occurred before. In Alaska, the onset of a climatic shift -- a warming -- in 1976-1977 ended the multidecade cold trend in the mid-20th century returning temperatures to those of the early 20th century.

In addition, a study commissioned by Canada's Fisheries and Oceans Department examined the relationship between air temperature and sea ice coverage, concluding, "the possible impact of global warming appears to play a minor role in changes to Arctic sea ice."

According to the Arctic Assessment the threat to polar bears is threefold: changes in rainfall or snowfall amounts or patterns could affect the ability of bears primary prey species (seals) to successfully reproduce; decreased sea ice could result in greater number of polar bears drowning or living more on land, negatively affecting their diet by forcing them to use their fat stores prior to hibernation; and unusual warm spells could cause the collapse of winter dens or force more bears into less desirable den areas.

Though uniquely adapted to the Arctic, polar bears are not wedded solely to its coldest parts nor a specific Arctic diet. Aside from a variety of seals, they eat fish, kelp, caribou, ducks, sea birds, the occasional beluga whale and musk ox and

scavenged whale and walrus carcasses.

Interestingly, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has also written on the threats posed to polar bears from global warming. But, their own data Bay region. By contrast, another two populations -- about 13.6 percent of the total number -- are growing and they live in areas where air temperatures have risen, near the Bering Strait and the Chukchi Sea.

As for the rest, 10 populations -- comprising about 45.4 percent of the total -- are stable, and the status of the remaining six is unknown.

on polar bear populations contradict claims that rising air temperatures are causing a decline in polar bear populations.

According to the WWF there are some 22,000 polar bears in

Conclusion: based on the available evidence there is little reason to believe the current warming trend will lead to extinction of polar bears.

These bears have survived for thousands of years, during both colder and warmer periods, and their populations are by and large in good shape. Polar bears may face many threats, but global warming is not

about 20 distinct populations worldwide. Only two bear populations -- accounting for about 16.4 percent of the total -- are decreasing, and they are in areas where air temperatures have actually fallen, such as the Baffin primary among them. Global warming alarmists are like the wizard of Oz, asking the public fear the spectacle, but not to pull back the curtain and unmask them for the charlatans they are.

H. Sterling Burnett is a senior fellow with the National Center for Policy Analysis.