

Written Submission No. 13

2016 Draft Nunavut Land Use Plan

Proposed Land Use Designation:

Community Areas of Interest - Polar Bear Denning, Emergence and Mating

To: The Nunavut Planning Commission

From: The Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board (QWB), and the Hunters and Trappers Organizations (HTOs) of Grise Fiord, Resolute Bay, Arctic Bay, Pond Inlet, Clyde River, Sanikiluaq and Hall Beach

Background Information:

Polar bears are an important part of Inuit cultural, nutritional and economic life. As a top predator, they are also critical elements in the functioning of Nunavut's marine ecosystem. Polar bears are currently listed as a species of special concern under the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA).

The polar bear harvest by Inuit of Nunavut is closely managed through a complicated co-management system, involving Inuit, the Government of Nunavut and the Government of Canada. Harvesting of female polar bears with cubs has been especially limited for many years, despite the fact that occasional harvesting of females and cubs has been traditional within Inuit society since time immemorial.

The 2016 draft Nunavut Land Use Plan (NLUP) provided no specific protection of denning female polar bears and their cubs against potential impacts of industrial development and other non-traditional human activities, even within areas where denning is highly predictable.

In our view, the discrepancy between government protection of females and their cubs from traditional Inuit activities and a lack of clear protection of females and their emergent cubs from non-traditional human land uses is highly imbalanced or biased. This discrepancy should be addressed in the final Nunavut Land Use Plan.

The QWB is encouraged by the following statements in the 2016 draft NLUP. Regarding polar bear denning areas, "[Although] the information provided to the NPC on polar bear denning

areas was not sufficiently precise, ... this will be reviewed as new information comes to light” (page 28). And regarding Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ), “the Commission’s objectives are to: ... (f) Utilize both science and IQ to maintain or enhance the biological diversity of Nunavut and to promote the restoration and revitalization of depleted wildlife populations.” (page 26)

In this submission, the QWB presents precise and clear information, based on IQ, about specific Polar Bears Denning, Emergence and Mating areas in Qikiqtaaluk Region, so that these areas and protective conditions can be incorporated into the final Nunavut Land Use Plan.

Polar bear denning areas are important coastal habitats where females give birth and nurture their cubs, and where they often remain for days and weeks after the cubs emerge. Dens may be distributed over very large geographic areas.

Nevertheless, in some areas, polar bear denning is predictable from year to year and at higher density than in other areas. Such areas with predictable polar bear denning have also been found in parts of Svalbard (Larsen 1985), where the high elevation and rugged terrain is similar to that of much of Qikiqtaaluk Region, unlike that in lower elevation parts of Nunavut. In Qikiqtaaluk Region, Inuit hunters know where denning females are more predictable, known through their own observations and knowledge passed on from their elders and ancestors.

Cub survival is unlikely if dens are inadvertently disturbed before females emerge naturally, and also if human disturbance inadvertently causes separation of females from their cubs during the period following den emergence. Starvation of cubs and predation of cubs by male bears are risks when they become separated from their mothers, even for short periods of time outside their maternal dens. This could be exasperated through human disturbance.

Females may enter dens as early as mid-November and as late as early January. They remain in their dens, giving birth and nursing their cubs until they emerge usually in March and April. Females and cubs may then remain near their den sites for up to a month, hunting in nearby fiords or at nearby floe edges, but they may also move away if they are disturbed or if hunting near the denning area is not successful. Disturbance of hunting females and their prey (e.g., denning ringed seals) can jeopardize early cub survival.

In denning and emergence habitats that are used in most years, females and their cubs should be protected from human disturbance throughout these periods, and from long-term industrial damage to denning and emergence habitats.

Encounters between female polar bears and humans in these areas are especially dangerous, as the females must protect their young cubs at all costs. Therefore, limiting human access in critical denning and emergence habitats is also an issue of public safety.

Extensive sea-ice areas are used by mating polar bears from March to June. Male bears compete for and pursue females for long distances for days over several weeks. Violent conflicts occur between males. Humans must avoid mating areas unless they are being guided by knowledgeable Inuit. Some but not all mating areas may be near denning and emergence areas. We propose to designate one mating area north of Grise Fiord because of the high density of mating bears each year.

Source of information: Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit.

Proposed Designation: Special Management Area

Proposed Restrictions:

Conditions:

- During Ukiaksaaq (starting November 15), Ukiaq, Ukiuq and Upingaksaaq, Critical Polar Bear Denning, Emergence and Mating Areas must not be disturbed by any activities related to:
 - Mineral Exploration and Production;
 - Oil and Gas Exploration and Production;
 - Quarries;
 - Hydro-electrical and related infrastructure;
 - Linear Infrastructure;
 - Shipping; and
 - Tourism without Inuit guides.
- In these Areas, any long-term projects related to these land uses must shut-down annually during these seasons.
- No activities in other seasons related to these land uses may be developed if they may impact polar bear denning or emergence in these areas.
- Any project in Nunavut that would violate these conditions is prohibited.

Proposed Community Areas of Interest - Polar Bear Denning, Emergence and Mating:

See the attached maps and the associated shp files.

Reference:

Larsen, T. 1985. Polar bear denning and cub production in Svalbard, Norway. Journal of Wildlife Management 49: 320-326

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