

Wood Bison and Polar Bears

The following thoughts are intended to show a correlation between what is happening with polar bears in Northern Alaska and what may happen on the middle Yukon if wood bison, which are an endangered species, are released into the wilderness. It is not a commentary on the wood bison themselves or on the various groups who have worked long and hard to help bring about what might have been a great idea if it weren't for wood bison having been listing as an endangered species.

"In the early 1970s, the polar bear numbers were estimated at about 5000, dwindled down significantly due to over-hunting. Today the bear population is five times higher at about 25,000 thanks to efforts made by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972"[1].

It's funny how people are: Environmentalists believe what environmentalists believe and capitalist believe what capitalists believe. To a hard core environmentalist everything is evidence of the need for greater environmental activism. For example, even after acknowledging that there is disagreement in the field and that some groups claim bear populations to be as much as 5 times greater than in the 70's they still see the need to call for them to be listed as endangered (threatened is just not strong enough).

On the other hand capitalist believe what capitalists believe. They see the same evidence (of increasing numbers) and therefore see no need to even consider the polar bear as an issue. They want to proceed ahead with no concern.

The truth lies somewhere in the middle.

When Canada listed polar bears as nothing more than a "special concern" they were being realistic to the situation: Polar bears were not at risk of going extinct. Nunavut polar bear biologist, Mitchell Taylor, who was formerly responsible for polar bear conservation in the territory, insists that bear numbers are being sustained under current hunting limits[2].

But here in the US decisions were made based more on political than scientific evidence.

When the US listed them as threatened they turned it into more of a political than scientific decision. According to Cato Institute's Patrick Michaels they were basing their decision on "obsolete science".

Every reasonable American should consider himself or herself as an environmentalist, meaning someone who is rightly concerned with properly protecting the environment that we must all live in. But no reasonable American should base such important issues on either extreme environmentalism or on unfettered Capitalism. There needs to be a balance. Balance does not preclude responsible development of resources at the same time as protecting our environment.

Because of the polar bear being listed as “threatened” “Two environmental groups filed a notice that they plan to sue the federal government for not imposing new regulations concerning oil and gas development in Alaskan waters...”[1]. The Center of Biological Diversity and Pacific Environment are claiming that the Interior Department is in violation of the Endangered Species Act by allowing oil companies to continue their operations unchecked”.

“On the other side of the pendulum swing comes a lawsuit that will sue the U.S. government for listing the polar bear as a threatened species, arguing that it’ll slow development activities in Alaska. Any development requiring federal permits or funds would have to go through a time-consuming but required consultation, mandated by the Endangered Species Act making certain the polar bear was not being jeopardized”.

This is what is happening in northern Alaska as a result of polar bears being listed with the lower designation of being a “threatened” but not “endangered” species.

Under the Endangered Species Act the government severely restricts one’s ability to hunt, kill or eat an animal on either the threatened or endangered list, so that their population will increase, and the government restricts the use of the land for development in the area where such animals live (120 million acres in the case of polar bears) so that their population will increase.

The government has granted some exemptions for the wood bison that were previously imported into Alaska that have not yet been released into the wild. These exemptions remove many of the restrictions that normally apply to an endangered species. But we see from the above described situation with polar bears that regardless of the government’s position regarding an exemption for these particular bison – special interest groups **do** sue the government about their decisions.

The same may happen to us here once the wood bison are introduced into the Lower Yukon. Some group, or groups, are likely to sue the government challenging the exemptions that have been given and if they prevail it doesn’t matter at all that we have assurances in writing that they will not treat them as an endangered species.

No matter how much we might want to encourage the importation of large-game meat animals into our back yard for the advantage that it will be to us in the way of food – do we want them to be animals that **have already been labeled** as an Endangered Species and then hope against experience that the courts won’t force the federal government to rescind their exceptions to the Endangered Species Act and restrict our rights to our own land while the bison population enlarges and the animals roam free?

Why not look into bringing in the same number of plains bison from the 4 existing herds that have been successfully living in the state for many years? The Delta Junction task force has asked the state to reduce the number of the herd in the area of Delta. Moving some of these bison might benefit both groups. The same benefits could accrue to the Innoko river area residents by importing plains bison but without the concern of them being an endangered species that exist with wood bison.

And why not consider importing moose (or even musk ox) from elsewhere in the state?

[1] <http://www.thegreenrocket.com/2008/06/23/the-polar-bear-controversy-compiled/>

[2] [a](#) [b](#) Taylor, Mitchell K. (6 April 2006) (PDF). [Review of CBD Petition](#). Letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. http://www.ff.org/centers/csspp/pdf/200701_taylor.pdf. Retrieved 8 September 2007.