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Southern Hudson Bay Polar Bear Subpopulation Harvest Re-assessment: Consultation Report

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A new abundance estimate for the Southern Hudson Bay Polar Bear Subpopulation has been accepted by management authorities. This has triggered the re-assessment of current Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) / Total Allowable Take (TAT) limits within the range of this subpopulation.

To promote cooperation and coordinated decision-making, the Southern Hudson Bay Polar Bear Advisory Committee was formed (hereafter, Advisory Committee). Advisory Committee representatives include Federal, Provincial and Territorial Governments (Canada, Nunavut, Québec, Ontario) and Inuit/Cree Land Claim Organizations (Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, Makivik Corporation, Cree Nation Government), with Wildlife Management Boards (Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, Nunavik Marine Region Wildlife Management Board, Eeyou Marine Region Wildlife Management Board) and the Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Coordinating Committee participating as observers.

A Technical Working Group reporting to the Advisory Committee prepared two reports: (1) *Southern Hudson Bay Polar Bear Subpopulation Status Report, September 2019* and (2) *Provisional Harvest Risk Assessment for the Southern Hudson Bay Polar Bear Subpopulation, June 2019* (hereafter, Subpopulation Status Report and Harvest Assessment Report, respectively).

The two technical reports were shared by email attachment with Inuit and Cree local and regional hunting and trapping / wildlife organizations in January 2020 and community engagement sessions were conducted in Inukjuak, QC (January 27, 2020), Umiujaq, QC (January 28, 2020) and Kuujjuaraapik, QC (January 30, 2020) that were led by Canadian Wildlife Service and Makivik Corporation representatives (with input from Ministère des Forêts, de la Faune et des Parcs du Québec). A community engagement session was held in Sanikiluaq, NU (February 11, 2020) that was led by the Government of Nunavut Department of Environment and attended by

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representatives from Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, the Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board, and the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board. Outreach to Eeyou Istchee Cree was via written materials and teleconference and was led by the Eeyou Marine Region Wildlife Board, Cree Nation Government and Cree Trappers Association. Finally, outreach to Ontario Cree was by written materials and an in-person engagement session in Peawanuck, ON (December 10, 2020) that was led by Canadian Wildlife Service (with input from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry).

On February 25-26, 2020 a user-to-user meeting was held in Montreal, QC. The meeting was co-chaired by Adamie Delisle Alaku from Makivik Corporation and James Eetoolook from Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated and brought together users from throughout the region. In total, there were 57 participants at the meeting, representing the Sanikiluaq HTO, Inukjuak LNUK, Umiujaq LNUK, Kuujjuarapik LNUK, Cree Trappers Association (community level), Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board, Nunavik RNUK, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, Makivik Corporation, Cree Nation Government, Cree Trappers Association (executive), Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, Nunavik Marine Region Wildlife Board, Eeyou Marine Region Wildlife Board, Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Coordinating Committee, University of Washington (expert modeler), and the Governments of Canada, Nunavut Québec and Ontario.

The presentation delivered at the user-to-user meeting included the same technical information that was presented in the community engagement sessions, as well as discussion points to guide the conversation.

The morning of the first day included a welcome and opening prayer, opening remarks from the co-chairs, and presentations by management authorities explaining the meeting purpose, key findings of the Subpopulation Status Report, and key findings of Harvest Assessment Report.

The afternoon of the first day focused on hearing Indigenous Knowledge from Nunavut Inuit, Nunavik Inuit, and Eeyou Istchee Cree participants.

Several key statements capturing the overall message of the participants on the first day were noted. Among these was:

- Nunavut Inuit: *Our forefathers were constantly hunting seals and didn't see a lot of bear. Numerous bears are a nuisance to people. They endanger lives and impact eider colonies and seal populations. We feel that a higher removal rate will not lead to the extinction of polar bears. There will be a lot of debate between scientific views and Indigenous views. Not including Indigenous views is very frustrating to us. These are our lives that are at stake, and our hunters are not being heard.*
- Nunavik Inuit: *In the 1980s I harvested with my parents. Usually, there were no polar bear tracks and bears only had one cub. Now we see 2-3 cubs and there have been fatal maulings of Inuit (in Nunavut). Once the ice melts, the polar bear lands and disturbs the community. I don't know where the idea came from that as*

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ice melts the polar bear declines. We want to manage ourselves, not to be told by people from other countries.

- Eeyou Cree: *It is hard to come to grips with the numbers from the aerial surveys. I represent 6000 Cree hunters from the coast and they talk about polar bear. A hunter from Waskaganish, after he was married in 1947, went to Charlton Island and saw no polar bears in 40 years. He told me he saw 12 polar bears just this last spring. This supports what the people from the north are saying. The scientific knowledge doesn't correspond to what we see.*

The meeting facilitator (Carole Spicer) summarized the key points and outcomes of first day as follows:

Meeting purpose

- Government representatives and Inuit/Cree knowledge holders are here to share information. The objective of this exchange is so that users can make well-informed recommendations to the Wildlife Management Boards about the level of harvest and other non-quota limitations moving forward.
- Government representatives are not here to impose a quota or decide the number of tags that will be issued for each community. They are sharing information collected over the last few decades using a scientific approach. In the same way, Inuit and Cree are sharing the information gathered in their own way with other communities, jurisdictions and researchers.
- All of the information shared at this meeting is evidence that users can be applied to help them determine what their recommendations will be to the Wildlife Boards when the Wildlife Boards make harvest quota decisions.

Scientific observations

- The 2016 aerial survey estimate replaces the 2011/2012 estimate as the best available estimate of subpopulation size. It is lower, however the error estimates are overlapping.
- Other signs such as lower litter size, a low proportion of yearlings, declining body condition and declining survival, are concerns that coincide with environmental change.

Indigenous Knowledge

- Inuit and Cree communities have been experiencing a higher level of human – polar bear interactions. Human safety concerns and impacts of polar bears on other wildlife (seals, eider ducks) are severe.
- The increase in polar bear encounters could be a result of a higher abundance of bears, changing distribution of bears, or changing behaviour by bears (such as

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spending more time on land and closer to settlements). It could be a combination of all three.

Management considerations

- Polar bear harvest is culturally important to Inuit
- Communities must determine what level of risk they are willing to take regarding both:
 1. The potential for human - polar bear conflicts that might result from maintaining a large subpopulation to maximize harvest opportunity in the long-term
 2. The impacts of a higher level of harvest, which could become detrimental to the survival of the subpopulation
- Everyone has the right to defend themselves
- Harvest should be shared equitably between all users
- Traditional methods of wildlife stewardship are of great importance to Nunavik Inuit and this should be part of the management
- Improvements should be made to include users in the planning, conducting, and analysis of survey results.
- There are concerns that collaring polar bears for research purposes is negatively impacting health of polar bears (especially females)

The second day was devoted to a discussion among users about recommended management objectives, views on non-quota limitations, and the allocation of harvest among user groups. The meeting facilitator summarized, and the participants agreed, that the key points and outcomes of the second day were as follows:

Agreement to Work Together

- Support for joint board/council hearings; Boards should work together – not just on overlapping issues, but on a shared resource
- Essential to work within the legal framework of the land claim agreements

New management objective

- Considering that:
 - Polar bear health is better than presented by scientists

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- There are concerns about the safety of people with the current abundance of polar bears
- There is a need to ensure that Indigenous knowledge (Inuit and Cree) is properly included in management decision processes
- Users identified two management objectives:
 1. Increasing harvest level
 2. Increasing Indigenous participation in management of polar bears
- Users also noted concerns that collaring is negatively impacting the health of polar bears (especially females) and that research practices by scientists are interrupting mother bears and this should be discontinued.

Sex-selective harvest and other non-quota limitation considerations and concerns

- Sex-selective harvest targeting males at a 2:1 ratio is not based on Indigenous Knowledge; negative experience seen when this has been done in other species
- Concerns expressed about the potential impacts of ending male-biased harvest could have on trade.
- Training for younger hunters is important, as identifying sex requires experience
- There should be allowance to harvest more males than females, but it should not be fixed at a 2:1 ratio
- Always targeting the largest males is a concern
- Cubs are rarely hunted, in Nunavut it requires a permit and is for special occasions
- Polar bear harvesting is not just for trade
- Prefer to hunt when the animals are in their prime; in summer the taste is the best, but for fur, hunting in the summer is not good.
- Do not support polar bears in zoos

Proportional allocation of harvest

- The allocation of harvest should be discussed down the road with a joint hearing of the wildlife boards
- Allocation should be fair and equitable

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- It should be taken into consideration that there are 3 communities in Nunavik versus 1 community in Nunavut
- There is a lack of clarity on the criteria used to allocate harvest
- The fact that the Inuit population is increasing should be taken into consideration
- Incorporate cultural knowledge and tradition
- Work with Inuit knowledge for accurate data analysis - current scientific data is outdated
- There is a need for more involvement with Inuit when determining TAH (rather than only basing the decision on given abundance numbers given by scientists)

In addition to the notes presented back to the participants by the facilitator, the participants had a discussion about recommended TAT/TAH. While Nunavut Inuit had previously indicated that TAH in Nunavut should remain the same or increase, Nunavik Inuit, led by Makivik, indicated that given there is no conservation concern, no limit on harvest need be established – Inuit traditional practices are sufficient to protect the population.

The meeting concluded with a summary of next steps in the process to re-assess TAH / TAT levels and commitment to continuing dialog to ensure collaborative information gathering, exchange, and decision-making. Next steps include:

- Preparation of a Consultation Report summarizing the information shared and feedback received at the user-to-user meeting, as well as community engagement meetings.
- A submission by the Governments of Nunavut, Quebec, and Canada to the Boards/HFTCC formally requesting that the Boards/HFTCC re-assess existing harvest limits in consideration of the information included in the Subpopulation Status Report, Harvest Assessment Report, and Consultation Report.
- Board/HFTCC determination if TAT/TAHs will be re-assessed and the format they will use to coordinate their efforts (e.g., joint public hearing, written hearing, etc).