

SUBMISSION TO THE NUNAVUT WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT BOARD

FOR

Information: X

Decision: X

Issue: Harvest Accumulation and Credits for Viscount-Melville Polar Bears

Background:

Inuit continue to hold invaluable teachings and knowledge about how humans can mutually coexist with polar bears by continuing to practice, adapt, and share Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ). The preservation of IQ is also ensured through ongoing travel to and harvesting of wildlife in important traditional areas. As Inuit continue to experience increasingly frequent dangerous bear interactions, IQ and traditional knowledge are also becoming increasingly critical sources of knowledge and guidance.

In Cambridge Bay, community members harvest and encounter polar bears from M'Clintock Channel and Viscount Melville populations. For Viscount Melville, Hadley Bay is known as an important polar bear denning and general wildlife area. In the past, knowledge of this area also contributed to the creation of Nunavut and information on this area continues to inform Land Use Planning.¹ Today, fewer harvesters are traveling to the area because of the fewer polar bear harvesting opportunities and tags available for the long-distance trip to be worthwhile.

Hadley Bay is approximately 250 km north of Cambridge Bay and trips usually require two days of travel plus camping on the ocean in the bay or in nearby locations as harvesters approach the area. Harvesters begin to make their trips in March or April—when there is more daylight—and to travel in groups for camping and safety reasons; for example, travel could be rough and members have occasionally killed polar bears in defence while guiding sport hunts. On these trips, which also occur through Dolphin-Union caribou calving areas, hunters also harvest wolves as a form of predation management. Harvesters could spend from one to two weeks on the land traveling to or camping around Hadley Bay, depending on whether there are polar bear harvesting opportunities.

Specific to polar bear harvest management, the Ekaluktutiak Hunters and Trappers Organization (EHTO) is concerned about the following:

- Polar bears are managed using the Harvest Accumulation and Credit Calculation System (HACCS). This system requires timely communications, reports, and sharing of harvest data from the Government of Nunavut Department of Environment (GN DoE) Polar Bear Lab. This data continues to be collected by harvesters and is shared with the local GN DoE conservation officer. While GN DoE distributes annual “Polar Bear Harvest Tables” that summarize harvest data

¹ The 2023 Recommended Nunavut Land Use Plan includes mapped polar bear denning areas, which have been designated as Conditional Use areas: <https://www.nunavut.ca/land-use-planning/draft-nunavut-land-use-plan>

and available credits according to sex for each community and polar bear subpopulation, these data are not always readily available due to delays in genetic sexing to confirm harvests. Continued reliance on genetic diagnoses of harvest samples suggests Inuit cannot be trusted to report on and make accurate diagnoses of sex of their harvests.

- When harvest data are shared or used at national and international levels without consent, inclusion, or awareness of Hunters and Trappers Organizations (HTO) and Regional Wildlife Organizations (RWO), there is a risk that information is being interpreted and/or assumed about how and why communities harvest polar bears (e.g., their intentions). IQ and traditional knowledge are not always included or considered in these interpretations. This poses an ethical concern for Inuit self-expression and -representation.
- Kitikmeot HTOs continue to harvest at or below their annual recommended quota. The reason for this pattern varies depending on the HTO. Credit accumulation is due in part to a fear of law enforcement actions triggered by unintended overharvesting (e.g., defence kills), and restrictions posed by HACCS.
- Under HACCS, HTOs and RWOs are restricted in their rights under the Nunavut Agreement (to use non-quota limitations). HACCS section 5.7.2 states "*Credit requests are made to, and approved by, the responsible RWO. The GN will verify and confirm the number of available credits and raise any conservation concerns with the relevant co-management partners and management authorities, if warranted.*" HACCS continues to involve complex sex-specific regulations and accounting and HTOs and RWOs must rely on GN DoE (Polar Bear Lab) to verify and issue credits. In other words, this process does not permit HTOs or RWOs to independently manage their harvest credits.
- The language of HACCS generally prioritizes and positions polar bears and their conservation (subpopulation persistence) at the core; community interests, safety and/or well-being concerns are not necessarily implied, yet these remain priorities and core concerns for HTOs and RWOs.
- HACCS Section 5.7.2.1 states "*Requests for credits that are greater than 25% of the subpopulation TAH in a given harvest year will automatically be sent to the NWMB for review of a potential conservation concern.*" For Viscount Melville, EHTO currently manages a TAH of 3 and more than 16 credits (8 males and 8 females). A minimum credit request of 1 must be made to NWMB, who meets only 3 times a year.

Consultation:

- In March 2023 and March 2024, KRWB hosted polar bear workshops to develop a regional framework for polar bear management based on Inuit priorities. One of

the concerns that was raised was the need for Inuit confidence in polar bear management and in HTO obligations under the Nunavut Agreement.

- In October 2024, KRWB and EHTO expressed intentions to access Viscount-Melville Credits and exchanged communications with GN DoE's Polar Bear Lab. At this time, it was noted that a request that exceeds 25% of the TAH (1 credit) needs to be made to NWMB.
- On 31 October 2024, KRWB resolved that they are in support of EHTO making a request for use of Viscount-Melville credits to NWMB (MTN# 10-2024-02).
- The issue of restricted EHTO use of Viscount-Melville credits, and requirement for NWMB review, was raised again during KRWB's Annual General Meeting from 5–7 November 2024.
- EHTO met on 21 November 2024 to discuss polar bear credits and intentions to hold a special meeting to discuss Viscount Melville credits.
- From 9–12 December 2024, EHTO Chair, Vice Chair, and Manager informally met with KRWB staff to discuss a submission for decision to NWMB. During this time, KRWB staff consulted with an active harvester and board member from EHTO who frequently travels to the Hadley Bay area.

Recommendations:

- EHTO recommends 16 credits (8 males and 8 females for Viscount-Melville be issued to increase the "Annual Recommended Quota" for 2025–2026 from 3 to 19. The most recently completed subpopulation survey suggests a subpopulation increase occurred from 145 (Bayesian 95% credible interval 109–221) in 1989–1992 to 235 (Bayesian 95% credible interval 148–569) in 2012–2014.² Because communities have not harvested Viscount-Melville in recent years, it is likely the population has continued to increase; it has been three years since EHTO has harvested any polar bears in the area. It is also possible that the Annual Recommended Quota (19) will not be filled, as the successful harvest will depend on travel and weather conditions and interest among harvesters in Cambridge Bay. However, the higher quota would still be used to promote harvesting opportunities and encourage harvesting and travel to Hadley Bay.
- Although harvest data is being gathered by HTO and RWO members and submitted to GN DoE, that data is not openly nor easily accessible by HTOs and RWOs. Agreements between HTOs, RWOs, and GN DoE are needed to enable

² Regehr EV, Baryluk S, Boulanger J, Branigan M, d'Eon-Eggertson F, Pongracz J, Thom A and Richardson ES. 2024. Modeling movements improves capture-recapture estimates for mobile species with sparse data: polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) in Viscount Melville sound. *Population Ecology*: 1–16. Available at <https://esj-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/1438-390X.12198>

ethical, shared, and equitable access and use of data among co-management partners.

- There is a need to shift how polar bear management is viewed and approached in a way that truly respects and empowers Inuit self-determination, and considers the physical, mental, and cultural well-being of Inuit. The use of language such as “Annual **Recommended** Quota” and “Total **Allowable** Harvest” implies an external influence and restriction on Inuit ability to independently make decisions.
- Despite changes in how polar bears have been managed over the last three decades, staff turnover among co-management organizations, and the passing of both elders and staff, IQ and traditional knowledge continues to persist as a consistently reliable source of data, knowledge, and guidance across time. Community members continue to hold the deep and complex history of Viscount-Melville management—and polar bear management in general—in living memory and this cannot be overlooked.

Prepared by:

Peter Evalik, Clarence Kaiyogina, James Panioyak, Dennis Kaomayok and Beverly Maksagak
Ekaluktutiak Hunters and Trappers Organization
cambay@krwb.ca

Dr. Pamela B.Y. Wong
Senior Research and Technical Advisor
Kitikmeot Regional Wildlife Board
pwong@krwb.ca

Submitted by:



For → Peter Evalik, Chair
Ekaluktutiak Hunters and Trappers Organization

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