

# **Polar bears are dying**

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**Body**

***Polar bears*** are starving. That's the broad outline of what a study published today in the journal Nature Communications warns.

Using camera collars and satellite trackers, biologist Anthony Pagano of the Alaska Science Center monitored the activity of twenty ***bears*** in the western Hudson Bay region of Canada for three weeks.

The objective was to study the behavior and survival techniques that these large mammals have had to resort to in order to cope with climate change, which has radically transformed their habitat due to the accelerated melting of ice in recent years.

The increase in temperature has lengthened the ice-free season by a month longer than normal, so that ***bears*** now spend an average of 130 days a year on land, instead of 90 (the length of the summer).

The ***bears***' favorite food is seals, which are easy to hunt when they live in burrows under the snow, or by breaking the ice that separates the surface from the icy waters in which the ***polar bears*** dive with such dexterity that some experts have classified them among the marine mammals.

Seals and fish are excellent sources of protein and fat, rich in energy, qualities lacking in the meat of land animals that some of the ***bears*** observed had to hunt for food.

Others resorted to carrion and ate carcasses of birds and caribou, while some, in an act contrary to their nature, fed on grasses.

Guided by their privileged sense of smell, ***polar bears*** often walk long distances over the Arctic ice to find food. Following this instinct, most of them remained active and walked up to 250 kilometers per week (the distance between the cities of Aguascalientes and Guadalajara) in search of food, which caused them to lose large amounts of body mass (one to two kilograms per day).

The observations demonstrated that the ***bears*** do not have effective strategies to avoid weight and energy loss on land, where their metabolic functions increase due to the heat and the overexertion they have to make to move over a habitat they do not frequent.

This loss of energy and poor hunting techniques on land are resulting in an alarming increase in the number of animals that are severely malnourished and die of starvation, most often young ***bears*** and females with cubs.

Previous research indicates that if the ice-free period increases to 180 days, the scenario would be catastrophic and could increase the risk of imminent extinction in a considerably short period of time. In addition, the abnormal presence of these animals in the terrestrial habitat jeopardizes the balance of the ecosystem and the survival of other species.

Pagano's study was of short duration, so it could not yield results that would allow clear conclusions to be drawn about the near future of ***polar bears***, but it does suggest that the species could suffer a significant reduction if the ice continues to diminish at the rate it is currently doing.

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