

# **Polar bears at starvation risk**

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**Body**

***Polar bears*** are at risk of starvation in longer ice-free seasons in the Arctic, despite their ability to adapt their diet and behaviour, scientists have warned.

Climate change is increasing the time some areas of the Arctic are ice free each year, forcing ***polar bears*** to spend longer on land in those regions.

***Polar bears*** monitored by scientists in a new study tried different strategies to maintain energy reserves on land, including resting, scavenging and foraging, but almost all lost weight rapidly.

The scientists warned that the ***bears***, particularly youngsters, were at increased risk of starvation with the greater amount of time they had to spend on land.

The study, led by researchers from Washington State University and the US Geological Survey, monitored 20 ***polar bears*** in the western Hudson Bay region of Canada, onshore over several weeks in August to September between 2019 and 2022.

Hudson Bay has seen the ice-free period increase by three weeks from 1975 to 2015, reducing the amount of time ***polar bears*** can spend on the ice, where they catch and eat seals.

***Polar bears*** are now spending around 130 days on land near Hudson Bay, whereas they used to spend 100 to 110 days onshore in the area.

The individual ***polar bears*** were weighed and assessed for their energy expenditure before and after the study period and fitted with GPS tags and cameras.

The assessments revealed they had a wide range of strategies on land, from hibernation-like resting to conserve energy, to actively foraging for food on land and even swimming tens of kilometres.

***Bears*** consumed berries, vegetation, birds, bones, antlers, seals and beluga whales, but there was very little benefit from foraging, as 19 of the 20 animals lost weight during the period, dropping an average of 1kg (2.2lbs) a day.

Only one increased its weight, after likely finding a marine mammal such as a seal or beluga carcass on land, the researchers said.

Two female ***bears*** were predicted to starve to death before the November freeze-up of the Hudson Bay, the study found.

The paper was published in the journal, Nature Communications.

**Graphic**

HABITAT LOSS: A study tracking ***polar bears*** found they are having to change their eating habits due to the shorter period of ***polar*** ice coverage.

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