

# **The polar bear, more than just a symbol of the threatened polar region**

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**Length:** 606 words

**Highlight:** La Croix interviews Christian Kempf, geographer, biologist and ***polar bear*** enthusiast about the consequences of climate change

**Body**

The ***polar bear*** has become the indicator of the health of an entire ecosystem, says a geographer, biologist who since his first expedition to the Arctic in 1973 has been raising awareness about the consequences of climate change.

“If the image of a skinny ***bear*** lost on a piece of sea ice is often used, it's because it symbolizes the effects of climate change and the disappearing sea ice very well,” Christian Kempf told *La Croix*’s Janice Bohuon in an interview for International ***Polar Bear*** Day February 27. Kempf spoke on raising awareness about climate change and safeguarding the ***polar bear***.

**La Croix: How is the *polar bear* doing?**

**Christian Kempf:** Listed on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List as a vulnerable species, the ***polar bear*** is, however, not on the brink of extinction. If the image of a skinny ***bear*** lost on a piece of sea ice is often used, it's because it symbolizes the effects of climate change and the disappearing sea ice very well. In reality, the ***polar bear*** has become the indicator of the health of an entire ecosystem.

And for good reason... According to the  Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Arctic sea ice is warming twice as fast as the rest of the globe. Within 20 to 30 years, the sea ice could completely disappear during some summers. However, this ice is indispensable for the ***polar bear***. It lives, eats, and reproduces there. It hunts seals, which make up 90% of its diet, near their breathing holes or when the female gives birth.

**Beyond climate change, the animal also suffers from pollution…**

Through currents, pollution from heavy metals and other radioactive elements move up the food chain, from plankton to seals via fish. At the top of this chain, the ***polar bear*** ingests significant amounts of pollution, which then end up in its fur, liver, and fat. According to several scientific studies, these pollutants could impact the fertility of individuals.

In addition, there are microplastics. In the Barents Sea [off the coast of Greenland], an extremely rich environment where the ***polar bear*** is present, our samples show that there is almost as much microplastic mass as plankton mass. However, studies are lacking to measure the consequences of this pollution on ***polar bears***.

**You have participated in several scientific and tourist expeditions since the 1970s. What major changes have you observed?**

With the melting of the sea ice, the ***polar bear***'s diet and hunting practices are changing. Today, when it roams the coasts, it constantly looks for carcasses of walruses and whales, whereas previously it would hunt live populations of birds or seals.

The ***bear*** has always had great adaptability, but the melting of the sea ice poses a risk for some of the 19 subpopulations that struggle to change their diet.

**What measures should be implemented to avoid a decline in its population?**

The first thing to do would be to establish a moratorium on hunting. Hunted for its extraordinary fur, the ***polar bear*** nearly disappeared last century.

In 1973, the Agreement on the Conservation of ***Polar Bears***, ratified by the five range states (Canada, Norway, the former Soviet Union, Denmark, and the United States), allowed Norway to stop hunting and the other countries to regulate it. The ***polar bear*** population then doubled, and today numbers 20,000 individuals.

Today, hunting is subject to quotas for local populations, which seems legitimate. The problem is that this fur feeds a foreign market, which only a moratorium can address.

Beyond that, of course, we must go much further in our actions to combat climate change, the only way to limit the melting of the ice.

Link to Image

https://international.la-croix.com/news/environment/the-***polar-bear***-more-than-just-a-symbol-of-the-threatened-***polar***-region/19258

**Graphic**

The ***polar bear*** has always had great adaptability, but the melting of the sea ice poses a risk for some of the 19 subpopulations that struggle to change their diet. (Photo from pixabay.com)

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