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# Polar bears face threat of pollution

WASHINGTON (UPI) — The world's polar bear population is threatened by man's pollution, especially oil and gas exploration on Alaska's North Slope, an Interior Department report says.

While the big white bears currently seem to have a stable population estimated at some 20,000 worldwide, the report said pollution already has had an effect on them.

The bears inhabit isolated locations ringing the polar region, but "even in waters so far north, these bears today carry traces of mercury, DDT and PCBs," said a Fish and Wildlife Service summary of the report.

"The greatest threat to these bears is posed by oil and gas exploration, drilling and extraction on the North Slope of Alaska," it said.

"Human activity in and near denning areas could cause fewer bears to come ashore to den and, therefore, den on the sea ice. It could also prompt mother bears to desert land dens earlier than normal, taking cubs to sea prematurely.

"Oil spills from offshore drilling rigs or tankers could reduce the insulating value of the bears' fur as well as damage the food chain," it said.

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