



Assiniboine Park Conservancy

Assiniboine Park Conservancy Mapping Threat of Forest Fires on Polar Bear Denning Habitat in Northern Manitoba

For immediate release: Winnipeg, October 27, 2021 – The Assiniboine Park Conservancy (APC) is launching a new research project that will help polar bears in Manitoba by mapping important denning habitats in the Province that may be at risk from wildfires.

“We are committed to providing the highest quality of care for polar bears at Assiniboine Park Zoo and doing what we can to ensure healthy wild populations,” said Dr. Stephen Petersen, Director of Conservation & Research, Assiniboine Park Conservancy. “The Western Hudson Bay sub-population of polar bears is currently most at risk due to the impact of a warming Arctic environment. Protecting their denning areas from forest fires is critical to the conservation of the species in Manitoba.”

Female polar bears build dens to create a safe place to give birth and care for their cubs during the first months of their lives. In regions of the sub-Arctic, particularly around Hudson Bay, polar bears den on land, where they can dig into peat or riverbanks. The denning period is a vulnerable time for mother bears, made even more challenging by climate change.

“For polar bears, the impacts of climate change include a shorter annual sea ice season, a longer fasting period on land, changes in the freeze–thaw cycles that can result in den collapse, and disruption to their food chain,” said Petersen. “Climate change is also a key factor influencing the frequency and extent of wildfires, which can destroy denning habitat for southern sub-populations of polar bears.”

Building on previously published work that maps denning areas across Canada, the APC Conservation & Research team will work with project partners to incorporate information from multiple sources – including existing scientific data, knowledge from resource users, and new information about polar bear denning in Manitoba – into a map of denning habitat and fire risk in northern Manitoba, which can be used by the Province of Manitoba in future fire management strategies.

The project is funded in part through a \$90,000 grant from the Canadian Polar Bear Habitat, a not-for-profit charity dedicated to supporting polar bear conservation in Canada through research and education.

“The Canadian Polar Bear Habitat charity is committed to advancing knowledge that will contribute to the long-term survival of polar bears and we are absolutely delighted to support this important conservation project. The results of this research will be critical to further understanding how climate change continues to impact this iconic species,” said JP Bradette, Chair, Canadian Polar Bear Habitat.

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