

**DID YOU
KNOW?**

Melting sea ice and starving polar bears

Polar bears, with their white fur and mushy faces, are the tundra's charismatic predators found mostly roaming alone in Greenland, Canada, Alaska, Russia and Norway's Svalbard. Although technically they don't live in the sea, they are still considered marine mammals because most of their life is spent on sea ice—floating chunks of frozen seawater. Polar bears use sea ice as a platform and wait for their favourite meal—seals—to pop up from a hole beneath the frozen water.



Until recently, sea ice, or the lack of it, has determined when and how these bears move. Between fall and spring, when sea ice is abundant and food is plenty, polar bears fatten up and build their energy reserves to survive the ice-free summers, during which they are forced to move to land. Here, they roam forests, hike mountains, or scour garbage dumps near towns to find scraps of not-very-ideal food.

However, in the last few decades, as the planet warms, sea temperatures increase, and winters become milder, sea ice thickness and amounts in the oceans are decreasing. Studies show that in some parts of Canada, the ice-free period has increased by three weeks from 1979 to 2015. As a result, polar bears have been driven to land much earlier—before they can stock up on fat reserves. Besides, thinner ice, which breaks easily, can reveal the presence of the stalking bears and help seals escape—making it hard for bears to hunt. When food is scarce, female bears give birth to fewer cubs, and there's a higher chance that cubs and juveniles die young. When bears visit human-inhabited areas on land in search of food, these aggressive mammals are often shot and killed. Even if they find food, it's usually not nutritious or dense enough to last through the summer. All these factors have led to increasing starvation among polar bears. If sea ice continues to disappear at the current rate, scientists predict that two-thirds of the polar bear population could be wiped off by 2050.

- Spoorthy Raman