

## Study: Polar bears disappearing from key region

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This handout photo provided by the US Geological Survey, taken in 2005 shows Steve Amstrup holding triplet polar bear cubs in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. A new U.S.-Canada study says a key polar bear population fell nearly in half in the past decade, with scientists seeing a dramatic increase in young cubs dying. Researchers chiefly blame shrinking sea ice from global warming. Scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey and Environment Canada tagged and released polar bears in the southern Beaufort Sea from 2001 to 2010. The bear population shrank to about 900 in 2010, down from about 1600 in 2004. their mother was being processed for satellite collar tagging, weight, temperature, measurement, and other observations. (AP Photo/USGS)

A key polar bear population fell nearly by half in the past decade, a new U.S.-Canada study found, with scientists seeing a dramatic increase in young cubs starving and dying.

Researchers chiefly blame shrinking [sea ice](#) from global warming.

Scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey and Environment Canada captured, tagged and released [polar bears](#) in the southern Beaufort Sea from 2001 to 2010. The bear population shrank to about 900 in 2010, down from about 1,600 in 2004. That area is one of two main U.S. polar bear regions.

"These estimates suggest to me that the habitat is getting less stable for polar bears," said study lead author Jeff Bromaghin, a USGS statistician.

Wildlife biologist Steve Amstrup, who started the study for the USGS and left to become chief scientist at the conservation group Polar Bear International, said his early research in the 1980s found about 1,800 polar bears in the region.

"The habitat was profoundly different by the late 1990s, early 2000s," said Amstrup, a co-author of the study in the journal *Ecological Applications*.

Bromaghin said only two of 80 polar bear cubs the team tracked between 2004 and 2007 survived. Normally about half of cubs live.

"We suspect that they are dying of starvation," Bromaghin said.

In this part of the Arctic, there used to be more sea ice in the summer; that's where seals lived, and seals are what bears ate. With limited access

to the seals, the cubs probably starved, he said.



This handout photo provided by the US Geological Survey, taken in 2005, shows a male polar bear approaching biologists in Beaufort Sea, Alaska. A new U.S.-Canada study says a key polar bear population fell nearly in half in the past decade, with scientists seeing a dramatic increase in young cubs dying. Researchers chiefly blame shrinking sea ice from global warming. Scientists from the US Geological Survey and Environment Canada tagged and released polar bears in the southern Beaufort Sea from 2001 to 2010. The bear population shrank to about 900 in 2010, down from about 1600 in 2004. (AP Photo/Steven C. Amstrup, USGS)

Arctic summer sea ice had been declining since the late 1970s but "we've seen over the past decade, decade-and-a-half, the rate of decline has really accelerated," said Mark Serreze, director of the National Snow and Ice Data Center in Colorado. And 2007 was "a wake-up call" for

scientists because sea ice shrank to a low scientists had not expected or seen before. Sea ice levels dropped even lower in 2012 and have recovered a tad since.

"There is definitely a relationship here between what's happening to the bears and what's happening to the ice," said Serreze, who wasn't part of the study.

**More information:** The study:

[www.esajournals.org/doi/abs/10.1890/14-1129.1](http://www.esajournals.org/doi/abs/10.1890/14-1129.1)

USGS polar bear science: [alaska.usgs.gov/science/biology/polar\\_bears/](http://alaska.usgs.gov/science/biology/polar_bears/)

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