Climate change might affect hibernation

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A U.S. study suggested global warning and its associated environmental changes could affect the survival of hibernating species, such as ground squirrels.

A Colorado State University study led by Professor Greg Florant, in collaboration with Penn State University Professor Stam Zervanoshas, found changes in snowfall, summer precipitation and ambient temperatures might be altered by climate change.

"We do know that there are definite changes in torpor patterns among the animals in their natural environments," Florant said. "The question now is: Will we see these changes in the lab?"

Torpor is a period of reduced physical activity, body temperature and metabolism.

The primary aim of the new study is to determine the impact warmer conditions will have on the amount of time spent hibernating. If animals were to increase their metabolism before plants have begun to sprout, they could die from starvation, the scientists said.