

What happened to climate change? CITES and the reconfiguration of polar bear conservation discourse

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Highlights

- Joint US–Russia bid to up-list polar bears to Appendix I protection at CITES in 2013.
- Animal welfare media campaign presented discourses of lucrative commercial hunt.
- Discourses decoupled polar bear conservation from climate change mitigation.
- Discourses disassociated polar bear hunting from Inuit subsistence practices.
- Polar bear conservation jeopardised by manipulation of scientific and trade data.

Abstract

In the past decade, polar bears have become the poster species of climate change. But in March 2013, a joint proposal by the governments of the United States and the Russian Federation to up-list polar bears to Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) diverted public attention from climate change towards the hunting of polar bears. Prior to a vote on the proposal, non-governmental organisations spear-headed a media campaign to support the up-listing. In the United Kingdom the campaign received support from celebrities and was widely reported in English language news media. Narratives of commercial legal and illegal polar bear hunting and the imminent extinction of polar bears were aggressively promoted, rhetorically supported by the manipulation of trade and scientific data. By rendering discourses of commercial hunting and a lucrative global trade in polar bear parts highly visible, sustainable hunting and climate change-induced habitat loss were rendered invisible. Media reports of commercial hunting de-coupled polar bear conservation from climate change mitigation, and disassociated polar bear hunting from regulated indigenous subsistence practices. A review of current polar bear conservation measures and an analysis of media coverage leading up to the CITES decision reveal these conflicting discourses, and suggest that more nuanced media coverage of polar bear conservation is necessary if appropriate multilateral conservation policies are to be enacted and publicly supported.

Keywords

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); Conservation; Hunting; Inuit; Media; Polar bears