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[WWF's Dr. Neil Hamilton on Global Warming in the Arctic](#)

He is the Director of the International Arctic Program



The WWF logo, the Panda Bear
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As I am trying to offer you, the readers, the most conclusive data on the threats of climate change, and the best possible ways of dealing with them, I thought I should enlist a second opinion, coming from one of the top environmental groups in the world. Dr. Neil Hamilton, the Director of the WWF International Arctic Program, was kind enough to answer a few of my questions. Without further ado, here is what the expert had to say on the threats on Arctic wildlife and effects of global warming in the region.

What do you think prevents some people from acknowledging global warming is real?

I think the most common reason is that most people have very busy lives and simply are not exposed to the real facts about what is happening. It's much easier to pretend it's not happening when you can't see, on very short time scales, the actual impacts. Coupled with this psychological reality is the fact that society 'is now' rather than in the future. The inertia in the Earth System means that behavior today will have significant impacts tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, rather than being immediate.

The most serious impacts of climate change today are not seen by most people in the western world as few venture into the developing world, or the poles, where most of the action is. This, coupled with the fact that it is rarely possible to directly link climate change to a specific event in a specific place, all helps to seed doubt into many minds.

The final ingredient in this story is a tiny minority of people and organizations who deliberately provide disinformation and set out to confuse people, for their own ends. The coal and oil industries among others have repeatedly demonstrated their credentials in this area. The result is that normal intelligent people are confused, and rather than take on what seems to be a daunting challenge, will tend to walk away from the question.

Are there any specific interests in the Arctic, that prevent it from being declared "endangered?"

Simply calling the Arctic "endangered" would have little effect on conservation or climate change matters. There is a formal 'endangered' status for species under the IUCN and CBD that implies certain actions, and this has been applied to several arctic species.

What is required to create a sustainable future for the arctic region as a whole is a multi-faceted approach: dramatically improved multilateral governance, strong regulation of human activities (particularly those with potentially harmful effects like mining, shipping, fishing, and oil and gas exploitation), an Arctic-wide biodiversity conservation plan that takes adaptation seriously, and above all global commitment to dramatically reduce CO2 emissions. Without this, little else matters.

What were/are WWF's activities in the region? Do you have anything planned for this year?

WWF is the largest and most active conservation organization in the Arctic, by far. We have significant operations in all arctic countries, and a major set of programs that are expanding rapidly. Above and beyond our regular work this year is very special because of the climate

change talks in Copenhagen in December, where we will stage a series of events to highlight the danger to the world of the melting of the Arctic region.

We will continue our work in the Arctic Council, with polar bears and walrus, and of course hope to convince the countries around the Arctic to put in a place a strong and binding governance framework to protect the entire arctic marine environment. The polar bear work of course attracts a lot of interest. One of the really interesting things we do that attracts much attention is to work with indigenous people in Russia to protect their villages from polar bears, which are coming into town to find food, because the sea ice has retreated so much.

We are working to expand this 'Polar Bear Patrol' across the Arctic region, saving both polar bears and people. In real campaigning mode, this summer WWF is part of a major expedition to sail through the North East Passage, across the north coast of Russia, to illustrate both the impacts of climate change in the Arctic today, and to push for urgent global action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The voyage should be impossible, as for the entire period of human history it has been covered with ice. This year might be the last time when such a voyage could be considered an adventure, as if things keep going the way they are today anybody will be able to sail safely through the Arctic.

How do you think the Northeast Passage is affected by global warming?

The North East Passage is little different from anywhere else in the Arctic: it has already been dramatically affected. Melting sea ice is the most obviously visible impact, but other impacts have profound effects on the people who live there as well: pronounced warming, changing species of fish, changing plants, earlier flowering of plants, earlier breakup and later freeze up of rivers and channels, thinner fast ice, thawing of permafrost, different weather, rising sea levels, and so on. The treeline in Canada is moving north quite quickly with substantial ecological impacts.

What do you think are the challenges facing Arctic conservation?

The biggest challenge is that we are entering unknown territory. Today's best conservation models are based on an environment that does not change, but in the Arctic this is no longer the case. We will need to develop a new conceptual framework that, in a quantitative way, is able to deal with changing climatic regimes and a changing ecology. If we can do that for the Arctic we will be much better placed to deal with climate change in other parts of the world, because things change faster and further in the Arctic than anywhere else.

Once you go beyond the basic approach, another set of questions arise: what do you do about ice-dependent species? Who do you conserve the marine environment? What about new species that move northwards as a result of warmer temperatures? All of these are currently open questions that we do not have very long to address.

How is it that thin ice has replaced thick, multi-annual ice in volume?

The answer to this is simple: the ice is melting so fast that we are close to losing all of it in the summer. Last year during the peak melt season in September we were losing more than 75,000 square kilometers of ice each day. In 2003, thick multi-year ice made up 60 percent of the Arctic's total ice volume, compared to just 40 percent first-year ice.

But, five years later, the picture flipped. In 2008, first-year ice accounted for 70 percent of the Arctic's total ice volume, with just 30 percent from multi-year ice. And ice thickness has also decreased dramatically: it's now about half as thick.

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