

About the cover:

Something in the solitary majesty of the polar bear speaks to us despite the fact the predators often elicit less sense of kinship than do their prey. Polar bears hunt seals from sea ice. They feast on highly digestible seal fat which they store ahead of leaner times. Stored fat must last through the inter-ice period, at least four months, because the bears fast once the sea ice melts. The length of the fast is increasing. Global climate change and ocean warming have resulted in earlier melt dates for sea ice: in the Canadian Arctic melting occurs five to eight days earlier each decade. By current estimates, sea ice now breaks up three weeks earlier than in the 1970's. Polar bears must swim longer distances to shore and so are more vulnerable to drowning. Increased stress and shorter feeding seasons are particularly hard on pregnant females—they fast eight months because birth occurs on shore when other bears return to feeding. One polar bear population decreased 22% in the last twenty years, but human contact with bears increased, presumably because bears have expanded their on-shore searches for food. What the future holds for polar bears is hard to predict. We can reduce our rates of bear harvest, but whether we can slow the rate at which sea ice melts on a relevant time scale remains to be seen.



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