POLAR BEAR INTERACTION GUIDELINES

These Polar Bear Interaction Guidelines (Guidelines) were developed to ensure that activities are conducted in a manner that avoids conflicts between humans and polar bears. Polar bears are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), and were listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 2008. The MMPA and ESA both prohibit the “take” of polar bears without authorization. Take includes disturbance/harassment, as well as physical injury and killing of individuals.

In addition to sea ice, polar bears use marine waters and lands in northern Alaska for resting, feeding, denning, and seasonal movements. They are most likely to be encountered within 25 miles of the coastline, especially along barrier islands during July-October. Polar bears may also be encountered farther inland, especially females during the denning period (October-April). Polar bears may react differently to noise and human presence. The general methods for minimizing human-bear conflicts are to: 1) avoid detection and close encounters; 2) minimize attractants; and 3) recognize and respond appropriately to polar bear behaviors. These Guidelines provide information for avoiding conflicts with polar bears during air, land, or water-based activities.

Unusual sightings or questions/concerns can be referred to: Susanne Miller or Craig Perham, Marine Mammals Management Office (MMM Office), 1-800-362-5148; or to Sarah Conn (907) 456-0499 of the Fairbanks Fish & Wildlife Field Office (FFWFO).

When operating aircraft:

- If a polar bear(s) is encountered, divert flight path to a minimum of 2,000 feet above ground level or ½ mile horizontal distance away from observed bear(s) whenever possible.

When traveling on land or water:

- Avoid surprising a bear. Be vigilant—especially on barrier islands, in river drainages, along bluff habitat, near whale or other marine mammal carcasses, or in the vicinity of fresh tracks.

- Between October and April special care is needed to avoid disturbance of denning bears. If activities are to take place in that time period the MMM Office should be contacted to determine if any additional mitigation is required. In general, activities are not permitted within one mile of known den sites.

- Avoid carrying bear attractants (such as strongly scented snacks, fish, meat, or dog food) while away from camp; if you must carry attractants away from camp, store foods in air-tight containers or bags to minimize odor transmission until you return them to “bear-resistant” containers.*
• If a polar bear(s) is encountered, remain calm and avoid making sudden movements. Stay downwind if possible to avoid allowing the bear to smell you. Do not approach polar bears. Allow bears to continue what they were doing before you encountered them. Slowly leave the vicinity if you see signs that you’ve been detected. Be aware that safe viewing distances will vary with each bear and individual situation. Remember that the closer you are to the animal, the more likely you are to disturb it.

• If a bear detects you, observe its behavior and react appropriately. Polar bears that stop what they are doing to turn their head or sniff the air in your direction have likely become aware of your presence. These animals may exhibit various behaviors:
  
  ➢ **Curious** polar bears typically move slowly, stopping frequently to sniff the air, moving their heads around to catch a scent, or holding their heads high with ears forward. They may also stand up.

  ➢ A **threatened or agitated** polar bear may huff, snap its jaws together, stare at you (or the object of threat) and lower its head to below shoulder level, pressing its ears back and swaying from side to side. These are signals for you to begin immediate withdrawal by backing away from the bear. If this behavior is ignored, the polar bear may charge. Threatened animals may also retreat.

  ➢ In rare instances you may encounter a **predatory** bear. It may sneak or crawl up on an object it considers prey. It may also approach in a straight line at constant speed without exhibiting curious or threatened behavior. This behavior suggests the bear is about to attack. Standing your ground, grouping together, shouting, and waving your hands may halt the bear’s approach.

• If a polar bear approaches and you are in the bear’s path—or between a mother and her cubs—get out of the way (without running). If the animal continues to approach, stand your ground. Gather people together in a group and/or hold a jacket over your head to look bigger. Shout or make noise to discourage the approach.

• If a single polar bear attacks, defend yourself by using any deterrents available. If the attack is by a surprised female defending her cubs, remove yourself as a threat to the cubs.

**When camping:**

• Avoid camping or lingering in bear high-use areas such as river drainages, coastal bluffs and barrier islands.

• Store food and other attractants in “bear-resistant” containers*. Consider the use of an electric fence as additional protection. Do not allow the bear to receive food as a
reward in your camp. A food-rewarded bear is likely to become a problem bear for you or someone else in the future.

- Maintain a clean camp. Plan carefully to: minimize excess food; fly unnecessary attractants out on a regular basis (i.e. garbage, animal carcasses, excess anti-freeze or petroleum products); locate latrines at least ¼ mile from camp; and wash kitchen equipment after every use.

- If a polar bear approaches you in camp, defend your space by gathering people into a large group, making noise and waving jackets or tarps. Continue to discourage the bear until it moves off. Have people watch the surrounding area in case it returns later, keeping in mind that polar bears are known to be more active at night. Additional measures to protect your camp, such as electric fences or motion sensors can be used.

Harassment of polar bears is not permissible, unless such taking (as defined under the MMPA) is imminently necessary in defense of life, and such taking is reported to FWS within 48 hours.

*Containers must be approved and certified by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee as "bear-resistant." Information about certified containers can be found at http://www.igbconline.org/html/container.html.
Polar Bear Deterrence Guidelines

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced final deterrence guidelines that may be safely used to deter a polar bear without seriously injuring or causing the death of the animal. The deterrence guidelines, which take effect November 5, 2010, are voluntary and are intended to reduce occurrences of interactions between bears and humans in manners safe for both. They provide clear guidance for minimizing incidental encounters with polar bears, but will not change the legal status quo for any activities in Alaska.

The deterrence guidelines include 2 levels:

(1) Passive deterrence measures – these are measures intended to prevent polar bears from gaining access to property or people. They include:

   (i) Rigid fencing and other fixed barriers such as gates and fence skirtings.
   (ii) Bear exclusion cages, which provide a protective shelter for people.
   (iii) Bear-proof garbage containers to exclude bears from accessing garbage as a food.

(2) Preventive deterrence measures – these are measures intended to dissuade a polar bear from initiating an interaction with property or people. These include:

   (i) Acoustic devices that create an auditory disturbance.
   (ii) Vehicle or boat deterrence, e.g. patrolling the periphery of an area.

In finalizing these guidelines the Service is mindful of the inherent risks to humans associated with the act of deterring a large carnivore such as the polar bear, as well the Marine Mammal Protection Act’s (MMPA) intent that acceptable acts of deterrence are those that safely deter but do not result in death or serious injury. Therefore, these guidelines are benign in nature. While some parties may believe they do not go far enough, we do not believe more active deterrence measures are appropriate for these guidelines.

Independent of these deterrence guidelines, and under separate provisions of the MMPA, the Service does authorize active hazing measures that may be taken to stop bear activity patterns or to remove an individual animal from areas of human populations or work environs. In addition, the lethal taking of a polar bear in defense of life (but not property) is an exempted action under the MMPA. These deterrence guidelines serve to complement such authorized activities and not supersede them.