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Dozens of Polar Bears Descend Upon Russian Town

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"Almost all the bears are thin," an animal patroller said of the polar bears, which were pushed south by thinning ice. **Maxim Deminov / WWF Russia**

An unusually large group of polar bears has converged around a village in Far East Russia, forcing residents into lockdown, the global conservation group World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Russia said Thursday.

Residents of Ryrkapiy, population 600, were said to have organized patrols and canceled all public gatherings, including New Year's celebrations, to prevent the polar bears from coming into contact with locals. Polar bear sightings became increasingly common in Russia as climate change melts their sea-ice habitats and forces them to scavenge for food on land.

"Almost all the bears are thin," said Tatyana Minenko, Ryrkapiy's head of polar bear patrol in the Chukotka autonomous district.

"There are both adult and young animals, including cubs of different ages with their moms," WWF quoted Minenko as saying.

The 56 polar bears descended near Ryrkapiy from the neighboring Cape Kozhevnikov in search of food after the walruses they fed on had left, WWF Russia said.

“Bears also like to visit villages to see how people live and search for food,” said Mikhail Stishov, WWF Russia’s Arctic biodiversity projects coordinator. “This raises the issue of food waste management.”

Scientists recently estimated that plastic makes up almost a quarter of the visiting polar bears’ diet.

According to Stishov, the polar bears’ mass migration south is the result of unusually warm weather caused by climate change, which has thinned ice coverage. Until ice coverage becomes thick enough again, the bears will remain on land and search for food along the shore, he said.

“Polar bear gatherings are becoming more frequent, and we have to adapt and find ways to avoid conflicts between people and animals,” Stishov said.

WWF Russia says the villagers are waiting for freezing weather to harden ice surfaces and allow the polar bears to return to their habitat on Cape Kozhevnikov.

This year, video showing polar bears were wandering into cities in Siberia and rummaging through garbage in the Russian Arctic garnered international attention.

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