



## Irreplaceable Wildlife: Exhibit Pictures Species In A Warming World

By Barbara Kessler

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Photo: Wendy Shattil/Bob Rozinski

Polar bears, penguins and caribou are all facing an uncertain future as global warming melts their arctic climates.

If only they were the only species at risk. Tragically, these arctic animals have many cousins in similar straits in lower latitudes: From the American Crocodile to the Monarch Butterfly; the Green Sea Turtle to the Mountain Goat; the Grizzly Bear, Lynx, Mountain Yellow-legged Frog, Sugar Maple and Northern Flying Squirrel. An array of amazing mammals and marine life, as well as plants, is imperiled by climate change.

The effects are being observed already, as populations dwindle, critical habitat becomes inhospitable and breeding or wintering grounds warm.

“A lot of people know about the polar bear...however global warming is affecting species right in your backyard, whether your hometown is Boston or Dallas or San Diego or Seattle,” says Susan Holmes, senior legislative representative for Earthjustice and the coordinator of [“Irreplaceable: Wildlife in a Warming World,”](#) an effort to raise awareness about the plight of these species.

The campaign — the creation of [Earthjustice](#), the inter-faith [Noah Alliance](#), the [International League of Conservation Photographers \(ILCP\)](#) and [The Center for Applied Biodiversity Science \(CABS\)](#) – is anchored by a website and a unique traveling photo exhibit featuring the works of top nature photographers.

The 40-piece photo exhibit highlights nearly the same number of species. All face immediate challenges from global warming. Some, like the polar bear, are colliding head-on with climate change as it literally melts the ice floes beneath them. Others, like the American Pika, a chipmunk-like creature, are slowly being stranded at higher and higher altitudes as the freeze-line of their mountain-top habitat creeps upward.



Photo: James Balog

Still others are suffering an indirect punch from climate change, such as the moose in Northern Minnesota, where warmer temperatures have produced a glut of the white-tailed deer, which carry a parasite that devastates moose neurologically. The resultant illness leaves the moose disoriented and vulnerable to predators.

These animals – and at-risk plants like the Sugar Maple – are not threatened by some vague combination of human neglect and encroachment, but are affected specifically by warmer temperatures, according to the group’s consulting scientists.

And the ramifications for human beings are more profound than the potential loss of our ability to enjoy the beauties of nature.

Take the case of the Pacific salmon. As the rivers that the salmon need for spawning grow warmer, due to less run off from snowy mountains, the salmon’s ability to reproduce is impaired. Already under stress from pollution, fishing and the damming of some rivers, the Pacific salmon population is collapsing.

In May, the U.S. government declared that the salmon stocks were so decimated they shut down fishing for salmon (which would have commenced this fall) along the California and Oregon coasts for the first time in 160 years. Scientists will be studying the collapse to identify all the triggers, but it is believed that inhospitable spawning grounds is one.

Most of the threatened species are not such a direct part of our food chain. Still, their stories have relevance for humans. Some, like the “snow-dependent” creatures of the North American Rockies, could be considered our “canaries in a coal mine” with regard to global warming, says Dr. Kevin S. McKelvey, a research ecologist with the U.S. Forest Service at the [Rocky Mountain Research Station](#) in Missoula, Montana.

McKelvey, who studies the Canadian Lynx, the wolverine and the Snowshoe Hare, has seen how these animals are affected by the earlier springs and erratic weather changes that many attribute to climate change. The changes are stripping them of the mountain snow pack they need to survive and playing havoc with their climatic adaptations.

If a Snowshoe Hare, for instance, remains white in the spring because the snow has vanished earlier than normal (or stays brown when there's new snow in the fall), the animal loses his camouflage and becomes easy prey.

If a wolverine — an animal that is so sparsely distributed in the United States there may only be 100 of them left — loses his snowy territory, his bridges to other reproducing wolverines spread out of hundreds of square miles dwindle.



Photo: Dorothy Keeler

For a Lynx, adapted to a snowy life with giant padded feet, the loss of snow means he loses his predatory advantage.

“If you lose your snow, the Lynx is out of luck,” says McKelvey. “He’s got feet that are three times too big, and he’s in a world of other predators with normal-sized feet.”

Our adaptations are different, but it’s not a stretch of the imagination to see these matters as cautionary tales for human beings.

The Irreplaceable exhibit opened in Providence, R.I., in the spring. It spent May and part of June at the Roxy Theatre in Missoula, where it closes June 20. The exhibit then travels to Seattle (July 1-Aug. 1); San Francisco (Sept 1- Oct 1); and to Los Angeles (Winter 2009), New York City (Spring 2009) and Washington D.C., (Spring 2009). See the [calendar](#) for updates.

A mini-show will travel to other venues and may be available for bookings.

Those interested in participating in the Irreplaceable Wildlife campaign can sign a [“Call to Care”](#) and post photographs of themselves to the site, symbolizing their concern. Next spring the photographs will be collected and used to create a large wildlife photo mosaic — [a photo petition](#) — that will be presented to Congress as a message that the public cares about wildlife.

Organizers hope that the website and photo exhibit, in drawing the connection between global warming and wildlife in jeopardy, will build public concern. “Our images are some of the more extraordinarily haunting and beautiful that you’ll see...” Holmes said. “The images are inspiring and we’re hoping that they’ll inspire people to act and get involved.”

To see the slideshow:

[http://www.greenrightnow.com/gallery/main.php?g2\\_itemId=203](http://www.greenrightnow.com/gallery/main.php?g2_itemId=203)