

On Thin Ice Campaign Backgrounder

Ontario is a pivotal player in the global struggle to stabilize our climate and conserve biodiversity. We have the world's most southern population of polar bears – the “poster beast”¹ for climate change issues- and one of the richest natural carbon reserves in the world. Carbon is the building block for greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide - CO₂, methane - CH₄, etc... Pressure to extract resources threatens to release this carbon and accelerate climate change.

Most people know that polar bears are acutely threatened by global warming and the melting of sea ice. Polar bears are both perfectly adapted to ice and cold and inseparably dependent on it. Ice is the platform from which they must hunt for seals and the stage on which they play out their life dramas of wandering courtships and coupling. Their Latin name is *Ursus maritimus*, the Sea Bear. A better name might be *Ursus glacialis*, Ice Bear, to reflect their dependence on the frozen Arctic. As such, they are an early warning system for climate change.

We are also keenly aware that increases in greenhouse gases from human combustion of fossil fuels are mainly responsible for climate change. So we are rightly advised to reduce our energy consumption and shift to renewable sources of energy. What is less well known is that the other significant contributor to global warming is conversion of carbon rich ecosystems from industrial development such as forestry, mining and hydro development.

Ice bears, climate change and carbon choices collide dramatically in Ontario. Our far north has both polar bears and globally significant carbon reserves. Recent research indicates that the carbon stored in peat bogs alone is equivalent to up to 65 years' worth of the world's current carbon emissions from fossil fuel burning. Clumsy, and ill thought development of these ecosystems will release huge amounts of greenhouse gases and compromise their ability to store carbon in the future. Tremendous effort is being expended by industry to explore and develop forests and peatlands for resource extraction. Ontario's first diamond mine, Debeer's Victor project began construction in 2006. More mines are slated to follow.

The good news is that Ontario's far north is still largely undisturbed. Further, Premier Dalton McGuinty has promised to preserve more than half of this area and its carbon storehouse capacity and plan for sustainable development on the rest.

This is an unprecedented promise and one we need to keep.

Our climate is at a tipping point. Releasing vast boreal carbon stores through irresponsible development will be like adding kerosene to the wildfire of climate change. Conserving carbon within intact ecosystems is vital for climate stability. Polar bears will be among the first casualties if we fail to act.

¹ Terry O'Reilly, CBC Radio's *Age of Persuasion*, Six Remarkable Brands Episode.