

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES  
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA

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MANAGEMENT AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE OF POLAR BEAR FROM CANADA

1. This document has been submitted by Canada\*.
2. The intent of this document is to provide CITES Parties with the current facts on international trade of polar bear from Canada.

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\* *The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CITES Secretariat or the United Nations Environment Programme concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.*

- Canada takes its responsibilities regarding the conservation of polar bear very seriously and has confidence in its sustainable management of this species.
- Polar bear hunting is an exclusive traditional right of Aboriginal peoples. Polar bear international trade does not come from a commercial harvest but from subsistence harvest.
- Timing and pattern of international trade are not related to the harvest quotas. An Appendix I listing would have no impact on current national harvest quotas.
- Commercial exports from Canada have not increased over the years.
- While polar bears may face habitat changes due to climate change and other factors, CITES will not help protect the species from climate change.
- Canada remains committed to existing collaborative international agreements on conservation and management of polar bears.

### **I. Summary Facts on Polar Bear International Trade**

1. According to Conf 9.24 (Rev CoP14), the Criteria for Appendix I species require **first** that the species is known to be in international trade **and** that trade has or may have a detrimental impact on the status of the species (Res. Conf. 9.24 (Rev CoP14), Annex 5, definition of “*is or may be affected by trade*”).
  - a. **The species is known to be in international trade, through Aboriginal subsistence harvest.**
    - i. International trade of polar bear is allowed through the 1975 CITES Appendix II listing and is not in contravention to other agreements. Though commercial harvest of polar bears is prohibited in all the polar bear range states through the 1973 international *Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears*, subsistence harvest is an exclusive right of Aboriginal peoples within the range states. In Canada, non-food products from subsistence hunting (mostly hides) can be legally exported for commercial purposes.
  - b. **International trade does not have a detrimental impact on the status of the species.**
    - i. Currently, only Canada allows international trade in polar bear through Aboriginal subsistence hunting. Approximately **2%** of the Canadian polar bear population enters international trade (300 bears annually; Table 1).
    - ii. A system of sustainable harvest management has been in place in Canada since the 1970s. Since the mid-1980s harvest levels has been substantially less than the quotas (Figure 1). The international trade of polar bear takes place strictly within legal harvest quotas. Harvest quotas are based on principles of conservation and Aboriginal subsistence, and are not market-driven; an Appendix I listing would have no impact on the subsistence harvest quotas.

- iii. Any trends in exports are not reflective of harvest levels (Figure 2 and 3). Timing and pattern of international trade are closely linked to the market and the domestic import regulations, but are not related to the harvest quotas. A sustainable harvest and a successful monitoring ensure that international trade is not detrimental to the status of the species in Canada.
- iv. The level of international commercial trade in polar bear bodies, skins and trophies has not increased since the 1990s (Figure 2). Data presented in the UNEP-WCMC CITES trade database do not accurately represent commercial exports from Canada to Japan since 2003, as “skin pieces” (usually 5 cm by 5 cm square pieces) were categorized as “skins” in the database. The implied increase in demand and perceived increase in commercial trade is thus spurious. Canada is working on revising this database inaccuracy where it occurs.
- v. The level of international non-commercial trade in polar bear bodies, skins and trophies has increased from the 1990s to 2006 (Figure 3). Non-commercial Canadian exports were driven by U.S. imports; through the *Marine Mammal Protection Act* amendments, U.S. citizens were allowed to import polar bear products from 1997 until 2008 when polar bear was listed as Threatened under the U.S. *Endangered Species Act*. The overall Canadian harvest level remains consistent over the years, including during the 1997-2008 period (see Section II for more information about the Canadian harvest system). As a result of the 2008 U.S. Threatened listing under the *Endangered Species Act*, non-commercial trade is projected to decrease by 50%.
- vi. International illegal trade is rare (see also U.S. proposal, section 6.4).

## **2. International trade will not have a detrimental impact on the status of the species.**

- a. Considering likely habitat loss resulting from climate change, there is currently an increased risk of negative effects from other potential threats that might not otherwise be significant. Canada is keenly aware of the need to be especially vigilant regarding the risk of overharvest of polar bear. As an example, the harvest quota in the Western Hudson Bay subpopulation has been decreased from 56 bears per year to eight as a consequence of a declining population likely due to the declining availability of sea ice. Canada has developed measures, and is working to develop a wider network of measures, to ensure that harvest remains sustainable. Since 1973, Canada has entered into several domestic, international and multilateral agreements and participates on several committees to ensure sustainable management, harvest, monitoring and conservation of polar bears (see sections II, III and IV).
- b. Canadian and international scientists are involved in extensive research to better understand the effects of climate change on polar bears. Their findings will be integrated in monitoring subpopulation status and trends and to help ensure that harvest quotas are sustainable in Canada.

## **3. CITES is not the appropriate tool to protect the polar bear.**

- a. Canada recognizes that climate change is impacting or will impact a large number of species in the wild. However, CITES exists as a regulatory mechanism to prevent extinction of species affected by international trade. The precautionary approach proposed by U.S. to transfer polar bear to Appendix I is neither supported by the CITES objectives nor will it help protect the species from climate change. Increasing international trade restrictions will not mitigate the climate-change impacts affecting the polar bear and many other species, and will harm the livelihoods of Canadian Aboriginal peoples (see section V).

## **II. Management, Quota and Harvest Monitoring of Polar Bears in Canada**

Canada is home to about 15,500 polar bears, which is approximately two-thirds of the world's total estimated population of 20,000-25,000 individuals. The overall population size has varied little over the past 15 years. Although polar bears in Canada are considered to be of one population, trend calculations and management of polar bear take place at the subpopulation (or management unit) level. Canada is home to 13 of 19 global populations, of which three are shared with Greenland and one with the United States. Over 90% of the polar bears in Canada occur in two of Canada's northernmost territories: Nunavut and the Northwest Territories.

Management measures are integral to the conservation of polar bears in Canada and have existed in the current form since the 1970s. The current management and conservation measures for polar bears apply to subsistence harvesting, conservation hunting, and trade of the species and are both successful and functional in Canada's Arctic regions.

In most regions, harvest is controlled through a carefully assessed quota system involving local communities, wildlife management boards established through land claim agreements, and provincial, territorial and federal governments. This system strives to continually maintain viable populations while maintaining access to polar bears for subsistence use and economic benefits for Arctic communities through sale of skins to fur dealers and, in some regions, through sport hunting. In two Canadian provinces where no quota system is in place, harvest is well below an agreed level of harvest set through historical agreements with Aboriginal peoples.

Quotas are allocated exclusively to Aboriginal peoples and include all known human-caused mortalities: subsistence harvest, sport hunting, known illegal kills, and kills in defense of life and property. Illegal harvest of polar bear is extremely rare in Canada and is not a threat to the species; there is no incentive to trade illegally polar bear items as legal international trade satisfies trade demand.

In Nunavut and the Northwest Territories of Canada, Aboriginal peoples may choose to fill part of their quota by offering a guided sport hunt to non-Aboriginal peoples using traditional methods of hunting. In this way, sport hunting activities represent an economic opportunity for some residents of northern Aboriginal communities who have few other sources of income. This sport hunt represents only a portion of the quotas (historically a maximum of 20% of the overall harvest).

Scientific data (based on mark-recapture studies and population viability analyses (modelling)), as well as harvest data and Aboriginal traditional knowledge, are used to help determine the subpopulation status on an ongoing basis. Polar bear harvest provides scientific data on location, movements, genetics and specific characteristics of subpopulations. Periodic population estimates are used to monitor subpopulation status and trends and to help ensure that quotas are appropriate. These studies are lengthy, expensive and logistically challenging given the remoteness and the large geographical area to be covered. Studies are conducted on a cyclical basis such that each subpopulation is generally evaluated every 15 years.

Harvest of polar bears within Canada is strictly regulated and monitored annually by jurisdictions. Hunting permits and quota tags are used to determine the number of animals harvested per year in each jurisdiction. Mandatory reporting of all human kills to jurisdictional conservation officers is required. Trade of polar bear within Canada is monitored via jurisdictional export permits, and international trade is monitored via the CITES permitting system. Compliance and quality of reporting of harvest is high, because jurisdictions have a shared interest to ensure long-term, sustainable harvest of the species.

## **III. Harvest Rate and Sustainability of the Traditional Aboriginal Harvests in Canada**

Northern Aboriginal peoples in Canada have the rights under land claims agreements to manage and harvest species located on land claims, which include most of the Canadian polar bear distribution. Present Aboriginal harvests of polar bears in Canada are sustainable with an overall harvest level of 3.5% of the Canadian polar bear population. The quota system was established in Canada's northern territories in the 1970s. The harvest level has been substantially less and never more than the quotas

since the mid-1980s, (Figure 1). The international trade of polar bear takes place strictly within legal harvest quotas. Harvest quotas are based on principles of conservation and Aboriginal subsistence. Meeting demands of other markets, whether international or domestic, is not a consideration when establishing quotas. Therefore, an Appendix I listing would have no impact on the current harvest quotas and economic benefits afforded by international trade will not lead to an increase in the total number of bears harvested beyond the sustainable limit established for each Canadian polar bear subpopulation.

In Canada, there is high compliance with the quota system and quotas are reviewed and adjusted as needed as new information about polar bear subpopulations becomes available, with the express goal of ensuring sustainable harvest. Management agreements for some subpopulations in Canada state that as required, a quota will be reduced or a moratorium will be put in place to protect the species. Quota reduction took place in the Western Hudson Bay subpopulation, from 56 to eight bears per year, in response to data indicating decline. Cubs, females with cubs, and bears digging or in dens (where the young are born) are generally protected from harvest.

The majority of harvest in Canada occurs in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories where Aboriginal people must possess a government issued hunting tag in order to harvest a polar bear. The tag must be attached to the polar bear hide. Information is collected on each animal that is harvested. This ensures that the quota is respected and monitored. Furthermore, the tag system also provides the data to ensure the legality of international trade.

Allowing trade and sport hunting in Canadian Arctic communities results in strong local support for conservation measures that are science-based and foreign to their cultural perspective (e.g. polar bear quotas, harvest reports). Trade incentives are important to engage local communities in sound conservation practices that are prerequisite for entering the international market. Other jurisdictions, including Greenland, have become interested in Canada's conservation hunting industry as a model for promoting conservation of polar bears.

#### **IV. Agreements and Committees Related to the Conservation and the Management of Polar Bear in Canada**

Canada is involved in numerous national and international committees and bilateral/multilateral agreements for the conservation and the management of polar bear.

1. Canada has been an active participant on the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature)/Species Survival Commission Polar Bear Specialist Group (IUCN/SSC-PBSG) since its formation in 1968.
2. Canada, along with all other range states (United States, Denmark (Greenland), Norway and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Russia)) is signatory to the 1973 international *Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears*.
3. Since 1988 a user-to-user agreement has been in place between the Inupiat of the United States and the Inuvialuit of Canada for management of the shared Southern Beaufort Sea subpopulation.
4. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) has assessed polar bear status several times since 1986, with the most recent 2008 status being "Special Concern"<sup>1</sup>. Within the Canadian federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA), COSEWIC was established as an independent body of experts responsible for identifying and assessing the risk of extinction for wildlife species using a process based on science, Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge and community knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> *Special Concern status in Canada refers to a wildlife species that may become threatened or endangered because of a combination of biological characteristics and identified threats. Canada recognizes three categories for extant species at risk (special concern, threatened, endangered), while the U.S. recognises only two (threatened, endangered) in its Endangered Species Act.*

5. In May 2008, Canada and the United States signed the *Memorandum of Understanding Between Environment Canada and the United States Department of the Interior for the Conservation and Management of Shared Polar Bear Populations* to collaborate on polar bear issues to further the consideration of traditional knowledge, and to promote consistent methods for polar bear population modeling, data capture and research.
6. In October 2009, Canada, Nunavut and Greenland signed the *Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Canada, the Government of Nunavut, and the Government of Greenland for the Conservation and Management of Polar Bear Populations* to provide a framework for the cooperative management, including the coordination of recommendations for hunting quotas, of the shared polar bear populations of Kane Basin and Baffin Bay.
7. Through its Polar Bear Administrative Committee (PBAC), Canada is developing a national conservation strategy for polar bears. The Polar Bear Technical Committee (PBTC) supports PBAC by reviewing scientific and traditional knowledge to meet defined management needs in support of Canada's national and international conservation responsibilities.

## **V. Importance to Local Canadian Arctic Communities**

Canadian Aboriginal peoples have experienced rapid cultural changes in the last few generations. These changes, and the limited economic opportunities across the Canadian Arctic, create challenging socio-economic conditions. Maintaining a link to natural resources is extremely important for cultural, mental and physical wellbeing. This is accomplished by traditional activities such as arctic char fishing, seal harvesting, and caribou and polar bear hunting. Community-based wildlife management of species, the share of wildlife products, conservation hunting and fur trade play an important role in defining their culture and enhancing community.

The polar bear hunt is regulated and largely subsistence-based for Aboriginal communities in Canada's North. Aboriginal peoples benefit from the harvest of polar bear for skins, meat, traditional activities and income generated from trophy hunt and selling by-products (mostly hides), thus, there is great interest and support in maintaining a sustainable population of this valuable and charismatic species. Numerous examples from around the world have demonstrated that keeping an economic link between wildlife and local populations is an important component of sound conservation.

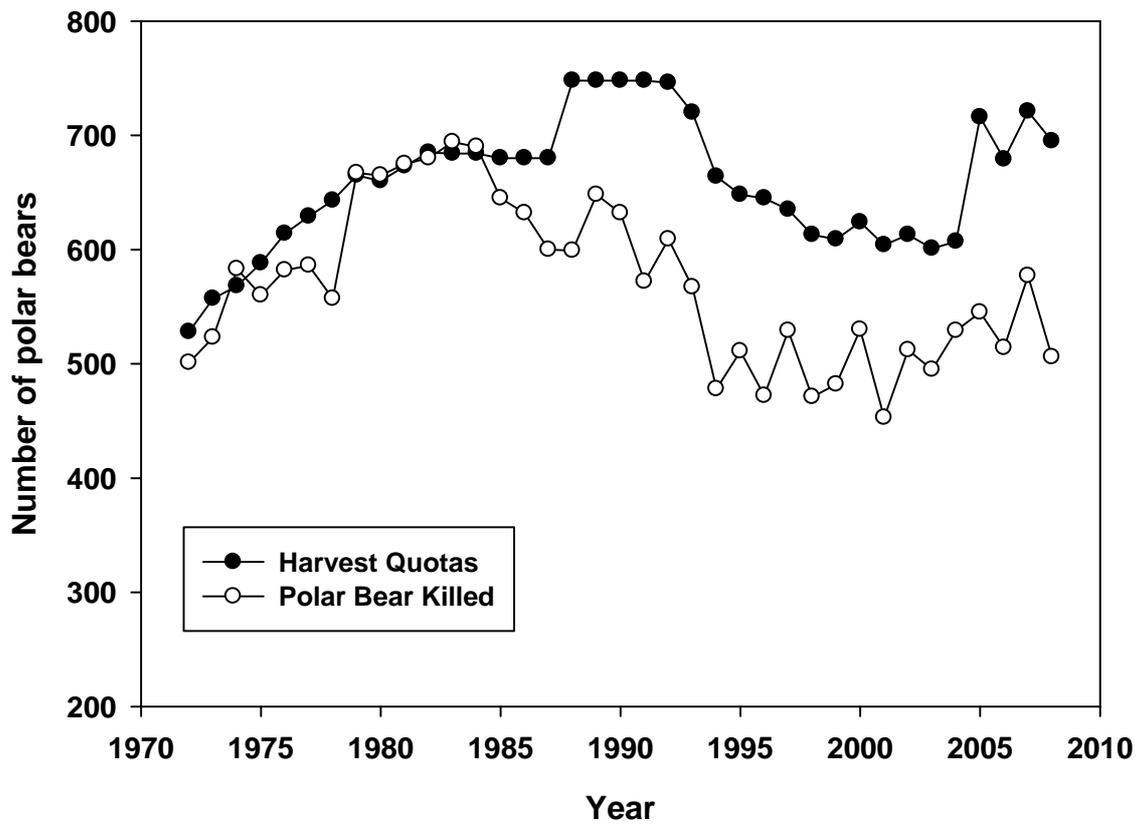
**Table 1.** Number of polar bear parts and live polar bears legally exported, estimated number of polar bears from which parts originated, and number of CITES export permits issued by Canada 1999–2008 (Canada’s Management Authority unpublished data).

Part	Year									
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Body	40	29	40	33	25	23	32	31	26	23
Bone	29	28	45	38	45	58	56	40	108	38
Carving	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2	0	0
Claw	31	20	0	66	70	274	75	60	0	0
Foot	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Head mount	5	1	2	1	4	3	3	5	3	0
Leather or fur product-large	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Live (sent to zoos)	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Skeleton (complete)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Skin	262	160	144	175	227	261	219	258	256	255
Skin piece (5 cm by 5 cm)	80	12	0	0	432	300	300	200	410	773
Skull	134	87	103	93	90	120	106	102	163	71
Specimen (scientific) <sup>1</sup>	249	148	290	154	176	0	830	1843	1065	3571
Tooth	0	0	2	10	0	6	0	0	3	0
Trophy	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total parts exported	832	486	628	571	1070	1047	1621	2542	2034	4731
Export permits issued	232	154	158	168	192	220	206	226	276	183
<b>Estimated number of bears from which parts originated<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>374</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>312</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>273</b>	<b>342</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>249</b>

<sup>1</sup> Specimen (scientific) refers to 2ml, 7ml, 8ml, 15ml and 20ml vials, teeth vials, faecal pile, hairs, 0.5g biopsy, 3L blood samples, blood samples, plasma samples, fat samples, samples, microscope slides, microtitre plates, slides, specimen 0.1kg and specimen 0.5kg and unspecified specimen.

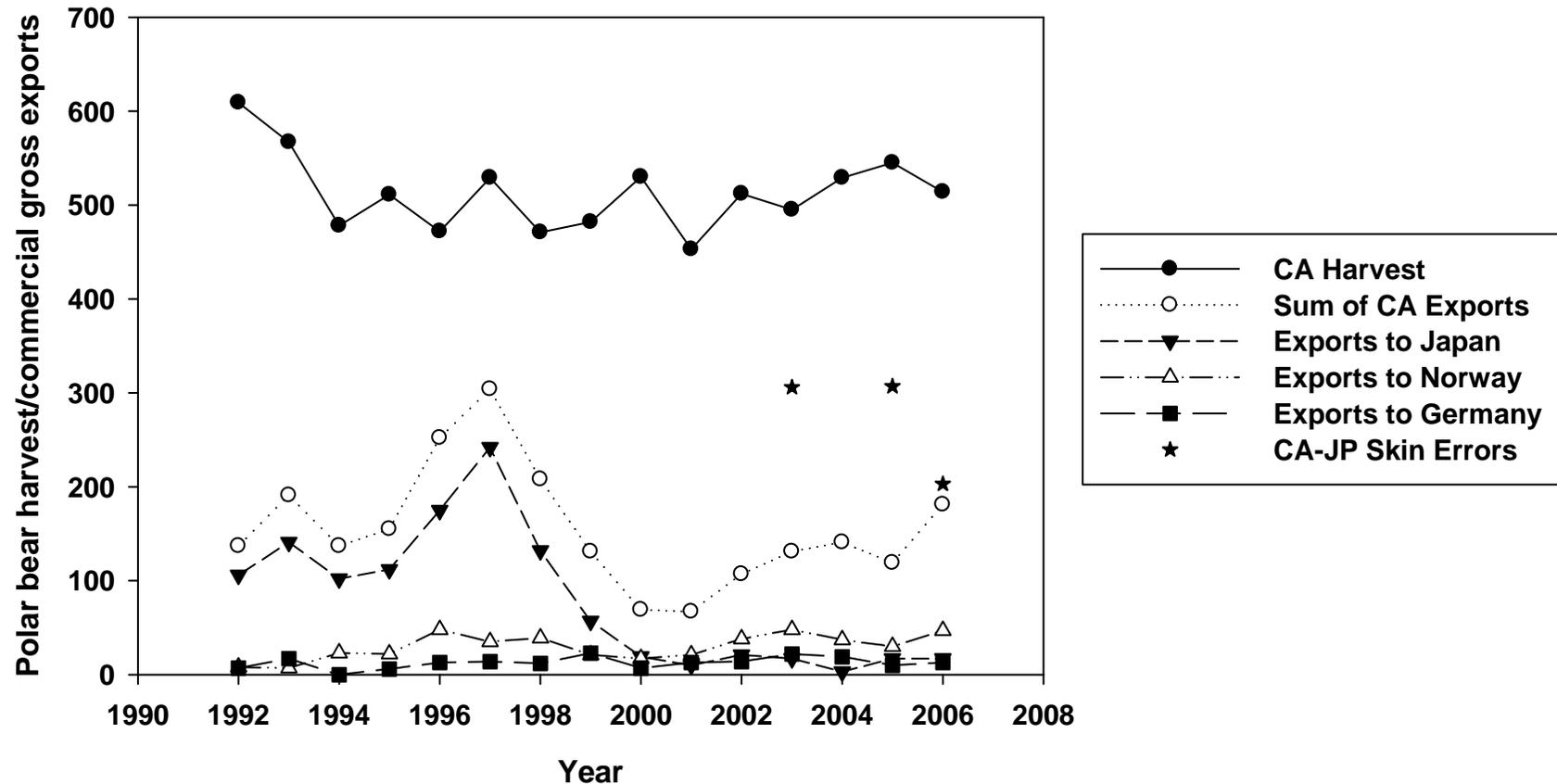
<sup>2</sup> This estimated number of bears comes from the Canada’s Management Authority analysis of all the 1999-2008 CITES permits related to polar bear parts and live polar bear exported from Canada. On average, 300 bears enter annually international trade.

Harvest quotas and known numbers of polar bear killed in Canada from 1972 to 2008



**Figure 1.** Polar bear harvest quotas and known numbers of polar bear killed in Canada from 1972 through 2008. The actual number of bears harvested is often less than the allowable limits and is reasonably stable since the early 1990s. (Source: Proceedings of the IUCN/SSC Polar Bear Specialist Group).

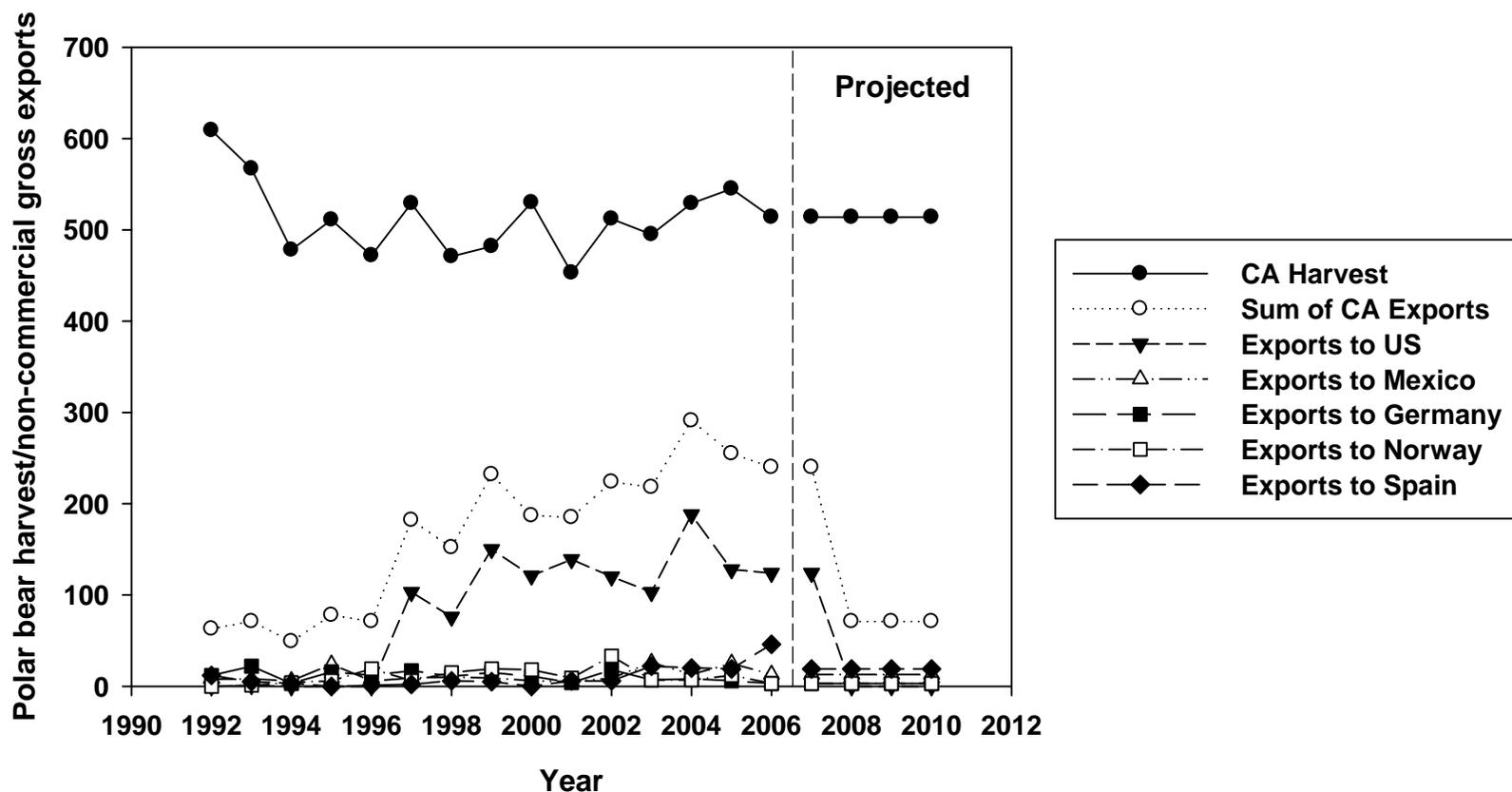
Canadian polar bear harvest and commercial gross exports of polar bear bodies, skins and trophies from 1992 through 2006



**Figure 2.** Canadian polar bear harvest and commercial gross exports of polar bear bodies, skins and trophies to other countries; source code: wild (W); purpose code: commercial (T). Canadian exports to Japan account for 50% of all the Canadian commercial exports, while exports to Norway and Germany account for 19% and 8% of all the Canadian commercial exports, respectively, from 1992-2006. The erroneously high commercial skin export data from Canada to Japan in 2003, 2005 and 2006 (black stars) were estimated using the average skin export of the three previous years of 2003 (2000-2002 average export = 17 skins; lower black triangles). (Source: Data from UNEP-WCMC CITES trade database 1992-2006).

\*\*\* Data on polar bear bodies, skins and trophies were used to get a better understanding of the international trade in “animals” rather than parts, pieces, derivatives, or products of animals.

Canadian polar bear harvest and non-commercial gross exports of polar bear bodies, skins and trophies from 1992 through 2006



**Figure 3.** Canadian polar bear harvest and non-commercial gross exports of polar bear bodies, skins and trophies to other countries; source code: wild (W); purpose codes: personal (P) and hunting trophies (H). Canadian exports to U.S. account for 50% of all the Canadian non-commercial exports, while exports to Mexico, Germany, Norway and Spain account each for 6-7% of all the Canadian non-commercial exports from 1992-2006. (Source: Data from UNEP-WCMC CITES trade database 1992-2006).

\*\*\* Data on polar bear bodies, skins and trophies were used to get a better understanding of the international trade in “animals” rather than parts, pieces, derivatives, or products of animals.

\*\*\* Given the 2008 U.S. *Endangered Species Act* listing, polar bear non-commercial exports to the U.S. will cease.