**Keynote address by IUCN Deputy Director General/Managing Director Poul Engberg-Pedersen at the International Forum on Conservation of Polar Bears and Jubilee Meeting of the Parties to the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears**

4 December 2013, Moscow, Russia

Your Excellency Prime Minister of the Russian Federation,

Honourable Ministers,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen

In the vast expanse of the Arctic, the polar bear is king. This stunning predator is master of the harsh ice kingdom stretching from Hudson Bay to the Laptev Sea, from Greenland to the Bering Strait, from Svalbard to Ellesmere Island.

(Some even say that polar bears walk on the streets of my home town Copenhagen, but I doubt that IUCN scientists would support that claim!)

On a more serious note, polar bears are a huge part of the folklore and identity of the Arctic region, particularly for indigenous peoples who have been co-existing with them for thousands of years and whose livelihoods are inextricably linked with them. They are also a critical aspect of the ecology of the region, with many important relationships with other species.

At the other end of the spectrum, polar bears have become a much-loved cuddly mascot for several world-renowned brands and events – not least the forthcoming Sochi Winter Olympic Games here in Russia!

And yet the unwelcoming environment in which polar bears have survived and thrived for millennia is now rapidly changing.

Traditional threats to polar bears such as pollution and unsustainable development now pale in comparison with the threat of climate change and related increase in human presence and activities in the Arctic.

For 40 years, the International Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears has been a major force in promoting sound management of this species worldwide.

On behalf of IUCN, allow me to congratulate the five Parties – Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States, all of which we are proud to have as long-standing State Members of IUCN -- on the 40th anniversary of this landmark Agreement.

IUCN has a long history in researching and working on polar bear conservation.

Through our global network of some 8,000 experts in the Species Survival Commission, we have been providing independent science on polar bears for more than 50 years, for example through regularly updating its global status on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

The IUCN Polar Bear Specialist Group, one of 130 Specialist Groups of our Species Survival Commission, was formed in 1968 following the first major scientific gathering to discuss conservation measures for polar bears in 1965.

The group developed from negotiations to finalise the Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears, was involved in negotiations to implement the Agreement itself and has supported it from that time. In the first years of the Agreement from 1973 to 1981, the Polar Bear Specialist Group provided technical advice to the Agreement, even submitting a resolution addressing climate change in 1976. From 1981 to 2009, the Specialist Group functioned as the actual Secretariat for the Agreement, leading on all related activities. Since 2009, the group has resumed its role as scientific advisor to the Parties.

Today, the IUCN SSC Polar Bear Specialist Group supports implementation of the Agreement by collecting and communicating the best available science for circumpolar polar bear conservation and providing advice on management and priority actions. Members of the group, a number of whom I know are at the meeting today, come from each polar bear range state.

Polar bears are currently listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, and later in the meeting you will hear the latest update on the conservation status & trends of the world’s 19 polar bear sub-populations as well as monitoring and new studies from our Chair of the IUCN SSC Polar Bear Specialist Group, Dag Vongraven, and Specialist Group member, Steven Amstrup.

In addition to the important work of the Polar Bear Specialist Group, IUCN as a whole stands ready to assist Parties to the Agreement in their conservation efforts.

Our multi-disciplinary network, for example the Climate Change Specialist Group and the Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group, will continue to address specific topics such as species vulnerability to climate change and sustainable livelihoods.

Our close working relationship with governments and partners, such as TRAFFIC - the wildlife trade monitoring network and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), allows us to help evaluate aspects of international polar bear trade in addition to their conservation status.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ultimately, polar bears are just one species affected by the ongoing profound changes occurring in the Arctic — one of the world’s most fragile and threatened eco-regions.

Today, the Arctic region needs our urgent help and attention to collectively address the many threats it is facing – from the unfolding impacts of climate change to increased competition over natural resources – all of which are posed by human activity.

In recognition of these threats, IUCN’s global membership, composed of more than 1,200 government and non-government member organizations, passed a resolution at our 2012 World Conservation Congress calling for greater engagement of our Union in the Arctic.

On behalf of IUCN, allow me to express our readiness to engage with all stakeholders to find sustainable solutions and work on priority actions for the conservation of polar bears and preservation of this vital and vulnerable region. The recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) confirms that it is now or never.

I hope that we will draw inspiration from the spirit of cooperation demonstrated by the Parties of the Polar Bear Agreement over the past four decades, and that this successful example of international collaboration will serve us well as we continue to chart the future of the Arctic region together – for polar bears, for people and for our planet overall.

Thank you and I look forward to engaging with all of you at this important Forum.