

Polar Bear Alley

View from Churchill

May Editorial



I ♥ Baby Seal Hunters – May 2006 Editorial

By Kelsey Eliasson

www.polarbearalley.com

Now before you call Pamela Anderson and Paul McCartney, I just want to clarify that I love the big, furry seal hunters and am merely ambivalent about the Newfoundland type. But, I wanted to start with a title that made a statement. Of course, that statement is: Perception is a big thing. In fact, a case could be made that it is, in fact, everything – ask any marketing guru and that's what they will tell you...for a fee, of course.

I wanted to use that title because I have been thinking about perceptions this month and, of course, since polar bears are involved, nothing is simple or straight-forward. I intended to write about climate change and bears. I would write about how 2005 was the warmest year on record and 2006 is poised to set a new record if the rest of the world is anything like the dreamy, balmy winter that we have been having up in Churchill. A quick note about how the ice on the Churchill River only froze to a thickness of 4.5' instead of the usual 6' plus would finish it off nicely.

And then an article by Binnur Ozturk was forwarded by email to myself and a number of other people. Originally published in the Huntington Herald Dispatch, it is a very nice little piece about Churchill, polar bears and climate change. In fact, it is a good example set by someone with a profound respect for bears and a strong environmental ethic.

I was fortunate enough to be the tundra buggy driver who guided Binnur and her husband, Ozzie, out onto the tundra for four days. They were quite a hoot! I did not know that she was preparing an article at the time (otherwise, I would have been much more witty and charming) but I did know that she was a person that had spent a lot of time thinking and learning about polar bears and was deeply moved by these magnificent creatures, especially one old majestic male by the name of Dancer.

However, one part of her Churchill article sparked real controversy with some people up here. It was the sentence, 'Seeing hungry, thin bears with less of a habitat on which to hunt and seeing sick bears that no longer had the energy to mate brought all of this painfully close to home.' I was really surprised at how this statement got under people's skin, including my own, mostly because I do not remember seeing those bears. The bears I saw were in pretty good shape this year. Of course, this is where perception comes back in to play.

While reading her article, I was also trying to think of how to word my 'spring update'. You see it has been the warmest winter on record, an extraordinary winter with no real blizzards and no real north winds. It is a winter that really underlines the predicted effects of climate change more than ever. Of course, all these factors have combined to make it a really great year for polar bears; not to mention, a great year for cub production and cub health.

Polar Bears of Churchill – Guide to Bear Season available at
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Polar bears need fat stores to survive the extreme temperatures of an arctic winter, they build this fat primarily through eating young seals in the spring. Mild conditions in December, January, February mean that Hudson Bay's bears use less of their fat stores while reduced snow cover and spring melting translate to easier access to seal birthing dens. This is doubly so when it comes to newborn cubs. They do not have the insulative layer of fat to deal with severe temperatures so a mild spring is very important to them. Not to mention, reduced snow cover over seal birthing dens means that female polar bears have to use less energy to access food after their eight month fast. Of course, much of these benefits will be reduced by an early break-up of Hudson Bay, of which there is a strong likelihood, but for now, the winter has done Churchill's bears quite well.

This winter has seen three sets of triplets, one family unit encountered by Canadian Wildlife Service and two from Wat'Chee Lodge, a good indicator that cub production has likely increased for at least this season. So really, the vast majority of bears encountered up here are not starving, desperate bears. In fact, the last two or three years have been pretty darn good for Churchill's bears.

But how do you write that without sounding crazy? More importantly, how do you write that without undermining the arguments for climate change? The polar bears of western Hudson Bay are pretty much the poster child for climate change. And, rightly so. If there are significant reductions in ice cover over the next fifty years, it will translate to a major reduction in the bear population. Of course, if there is no ice on Hudson Bay in fifty years, there will be no bears but by that point we will likely have much larger issue to deal with globally.

So I guess this is where perception becomes a factor, maybe people will just not grasp how important it is to live sustainably unless there is a pressing, urgent and tangible threat. If we argue that climate change is actually not that bad for Churchill's bears in the short-term but fatal if unchecked in the long-term will anyone listen? To put it another way, would anyone really have tuned in to Dallas if J.R. Ewing had been diagnosed with terminal lymphoma instead of shot in the chest?

However, the talk of starving bears is alienating the people who you most need on your side - northerners. These are the people at the grassroots level; the ones that live in 'bear country'. Many people up here are just not seeing a marked reduction in bear numbers or size. Many take offence to the 'starving bear' concept. This is not to say that they may not be 'statistically smaller' than they were twenty years ago but that honestly does not mean much to people up here. They are too familiar with wildlife cycles and fluctuations to be alarmed by statistically smaller bears. They are also familiar with people from 'down south' telling northerners how to perceive their world.

So, while this is an issue of perception in Churchill, it quickly becomes a major problem further north in Nunavut. Nunavut is an Inuit-governed territory within Canada that still supports polar bear hunting. Last year, they raised their population estimate for western Hudson Bay to 1,400 at the same time Canadian Wildlife Service lowered theirs to less than 950. Nunavut used

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traditional knowledge or *Inuit Qajimatunqangit* as their baseline while the Canadian Wildlife Service based theirs on data from a three-year mark-recapture study and the latest statistical software. Traditional knowledge contended that the bears were simply ‘somewhere else’ than where the researchers were looking. Nunavut subsequently increased their hunting quotas to reflect the new population estimate.

This year, there is talk of banning or at least limiting the U.S. sport hunt of polar bears in Nunavut. Based on the CWS data, this is being done in the polar bears’ best interest. At the same time, there is a new push in the Nunavut Legislative Assembly to mandate the use of traditional knowledge in scientific research and possibly even ban the use of helicopters in wildlife research. Following common sense and one thousands years of traditional knowledge, this is being done in the polar bears’ best interest. A case can easily be made for both sides of this argument.

Again, we are back to perception. Before I moved to Churchill, I would have been writing diatribe upon diatribe against over-hunting and quotas based on bears being ‘somewhere else’ but now that I have seen just a little bit of the north, I am not so sure anymore. I still think that we should err on the side of caution in terms of shooting polar bears but hunting is not part of who I am as it is with so many people up here. However, I do know that hunters, both Inuit and non-Inuit, spend a lot of time on the land and their knowledge should not be discounted.

Anyway, back to Binnur. She wrote a good article and talked about important issues and seems to be a generally pretty fine person. She starts her article talking about a little female polar bear that made a real impression on her. I remember that bear. I called her the ‘Duck Hunter’. She used to hang out at the end of a gravel spit, away from the commotion of the young sparring males. One day, I watched her get up stretch and swim out into the bay. She swam up to a raft of Eider Ducks, dove and then...there was one less duck. Bears don’t do that! Let alone little shy bears. Yet, there she was swimming back to the spit with a bundle of feathers in her mouth.

This same bear is the one Binnur saw as ‘blissfully unaware of the difficult life that lay before her’. I saw her as a cuddly little killing machine that had a bit of a headstart on the game. A bear that is probably destined to be a great hunter and a good mother. Of course, the crazy thing is that we are probably both right, just looking at this little bear from two different perspectives.

But, I think I finally have an idea of what part of ‘starving bears’ sets people off up here. So many articles now talk about bears like they are in desperate need of our help. This creates an image that we should feel sorry for the bears. Polar bears do not need our pity, they command and deserve our respect. This population has survived two hundred years of the fur trade and then another forty years of military testing and exercises and another thirty years of research, all of which have centred around the bear’s prime maternity denning area. To top that off, we built a railway through the denning area and launched countless rockets over it. Yet, the bears keep on rollin’ along. Canada even offered it up as a nuclear testing site (it was declined). Of course, the bears likely would not have survived that one but you get my drift.

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Everyone in the north knows that the climate is warming and that if this continues for another decade or two, the bears are in dire straits. Considering it has been fifteen years since we seriously got into the debate during which emissions have increased by over 30% (instead of the six per cent reduction sought in the Kyoto Protocol). Add to that the fact that China is now opening up as a viable market and there will likely be 50% more cars on the road by 2030, things look a little grim. Yet, it is still hard to feel sorry for the bears up here. I mean, it will be a shame if they disappear but that is all.

So, maybe climate change should be viewed as an opportunity to watch and learn from them instead of save them. Instead of looking at the bears as desperately in need of our help, use this as an opportunity to understand the bears' intelligence, creativity and resilience.

Dancer is a good example. By all rights, his era is over. Having watched Dancer for five years, I have seen him in good and bad years. He looks to be going on fifteen plus years if not more and this last season, he looked pretty rough, sporting some pretty fresh scars. There is heavy duty competition for mates right now and testosterone levels are running high out on the ice. Dancer is still in the mix but he is probably getting beaten up pretty bad by someone younger, bigger and stronger. In all likelihood, we will not see Dancer again.

On the other hand, you can never underestimate a bear. Dancer may stroll in to 'buggyland' in late October and take his usual place near camp. Bears have a remarkable ability to assess situations and learn from their mistakes and just...survive.

This species is not 'blissfully unaware' and will not hopelessly waste away as victims of a human-imposed disaster. They will do their best to adapt quickly and effectively. They will display their willingness to learn and their willingness to survive right to the last ice season on Hudson Bay. They may thrive in the short-term or even hang on until global conditions change to their benefit. Who knows? In the north, we have deep admiration and a familiar respect for bears. We need to start sharing this respect and some of the day-to-day realities of polar bears with people who care deeply for them in the south.

- Kelsey Eliasson is a freelance writer, publisher and nature guide based out of Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. He has recently released the latest edition of 'Polar Bears of Churchill' and built a greenhouse.