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A680/01/RBI Information and Ideas (Foundation Tier)

READING BOOKLET INSERT

Duration: 2 hours



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Polar Bear Invasion



The annual gathering of polar bears at the mouth of the Churchill River in Hudson Bay, Canada isn't just a benefit for tourism. It is also a unique opportunity for researchers to study the bears and their behaviour. Indeed, Canada's 15,000 polar bears are among the most studied on earth, and Canada's collection of data about polar bears is the envy of biologists the world over.

The bears, for instance, have helped provide important insights into their annual wanderings – migrations that can take individual animals over thousands of miles of tundra and ocean and then back again. Some bears from eastern Canada even travel as far as Greenland and some islands off the coast of Norway.

These days one of the greatest concerns for researchers is understanding how a changing global climate may be affecting the bears. For example, some researchers believe that Hudson Bay's pack ice now melts about three weeks earlier each spring than it did just a few decades ago. In some recent years, the ice has broken up in March, shortening the bears' hunting season by several months and leaving them thin and weak. As a result, some studies suggest that the bears are getting smaller and having fewer cubs.

Other scientists fear that pollution may be partly to blame. In some parts of Canada, winds, currents, or local industry add dangerous chemicals to the environment. These chemicals work their way up the food chain and build up in the animals' bodies. Even in the seemingly treeless land of Manitoba, for instance, bears can carry potentially harmful concentrations of chemicals.

There are also concerns about the long-term impacts that Churchill River's booming tourism trade is having on the bears. While officials attempt to control access to the animals, there is little question that the bears see far more people than they did a hundred years ago. And while the bears do not seem to fear people, the human presence could nonetheless disturb mothers with cubs, forcing them to alter migration routes. So far, however, there is no clear evidence that tourism on its own is harming the bears.

Indeed, efforts to protect the bears have had at least one positive side-effect: bears that may have once become used to feeding at garbage piles or stealing food from kitchens, and then killed if they became a nuisance, now have fewer opportunities to get themselves into deadly trouble. Still, some researchers are watching closely to see if bear-watching disturbs the bears.

Luckily, polar bears have captured the attention of some policymakers. Under a 1973 treaty, known as the International Agreement for the Conservation of Polar Bears, the United States, Russia, Canada, Denmark, and Norway work together to study and protect the animals. They have worked to limit bear hunting and control pollution. While these efforts have not always paid off, the world's 30,000 polar bears are – for the moment – safely maintaining their numbers.

SAVE YUPI



Trapped: Where Yupi lives

4,000 miles from home, locked up in sweltering heat, the polar bear of Mexico zoo needs your help!

Yupi the polar bear could not be any further from home. She's locked in a bare concrete enclosure in temperatures that can reach 35C. It's no life for any creature, but certainly not one that's suited to the sub-zero Arctic Circle.

She is probably the first polar bear to make it as far as Mexico, but it's not good for her. Even her tiny pool is too warm, and filled with chlorine. Cheryl Williams, of Yorkshire Wildlife Park, who is campaigning to re-home Yupi, said: "Polar bears are basically storage heaters. Under that white fur is black skin which retains heat and a layer of fat to keep it all in. On top of that she is an intelligent predator who would in her natural habitat be coming up with hunting strategies, and solving problems. She's not designed to just sit there all day doing nothing."

Yupi was captured as a baby when it is thought hunters shot her mother in her native Alaska. She arrived at the city zoo in Mexico, at just a few months old and was put in an old grizzly bear pen, where she has remained for the past 21 years. It's empty of anything for her to do, so Yupi spends every day, sitting in a small patch of shade, pacing up and down repeatedly, or trying desperately to cool off in her pool.

Her concrete patch is about a millionth of the size her Arctic home would be. The floor and walls are hot to touch, because they absorb heat during the day, and the pool is not refrigerated. Its only features are two tree stumps and a third encased in concrete and electrified to stop her climbing on it. Her only source of stimulation is looking out of the windows at the people who troop in to see her.

This is all Yupi has known since she was snatched from the ice as a baby.

Despite the horrific conditions of her captivity, Yupi is the main attraction. Her picture is above the front gate. Campaigners Zoocheck, who have sent staff in to assess her, say: "The zoo claims that Yupi is a valuable asset, a showcase animal that is well-liked by members of the public. She could survive for a number of years. For whatever time she has left, Yupi should be allowed to enjoy life in better conditions where she can actually do some of the things that polar bears do. She shouldn't have to spend the rest of her life sitting or lying as an exhibit in the heat."



Home: The Arctic, where Yupi should be

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