



# On thin ice

Is the future of polar bears at risk because of climate change? Tricia Welsh treks to Canada to investigate.

**T**he future of polar bears around Churchill in Canada, the 'polar bear capital of the world', is looking grim. With the sea ice in Hudson Bay melting about three weeks earlier than it did 30 years ago, polar bears are becoming another victim of climate change.

Officially, polar bears have been an endangered species since 2008. The World Wildlife Fund and Polar Bears International have been working with top researchers, conservationists, government leaders, photographers and filmmakers in a bid to draw attention to their plight.

As the ice pack on which their very lives exist melts because of global warming, their hunting season is greatly reduced, resulting in a lower level of essential fat cover that is needed for successful reproduction.

Since the 1980s, the Hudson Bay polar bear population has declined nearly 20 percent with a likely 30 percent decrease predicted over the next 35 to 50 years. There are now just 936 bears in the population. Research by the Canadian Wildlife Service indicates that there has also been a general decline in the body condition of these bears. Whereas females in the past might have had two to three cubs, they are now only giving birth to single pups or not falling pregnant at all.

After virtually starving for five months while they have been in hibernation, they need to make up for it, to fatten up fast and furiously in preparation for another season of mating, hunting, fishing, swimming and feeding their cubs before they retire again to the mainland in summer to hibernate when temperatures can be too hot for them to stir.

I'm one of just 14 in our group of nature enthusiasts who have come to Churchill for a four-day polar bear excursion with Frontiers >

01 Sow and cubs at Cape Churchill

02 Bear standing on buggy with photographer on observation deck

03 The Tundra Buggy

04 Polar bear statue at Churchill

North Adventures. Established some 30 years ago in Northern Manitoba, the company is the biggest operator in Churchill. Rugged up against the cold – it's about  $-2^{\circ}$  outside – we are snug and warm in the tundra buggy as we go in search of these elusive bundles of creamy-white fur.

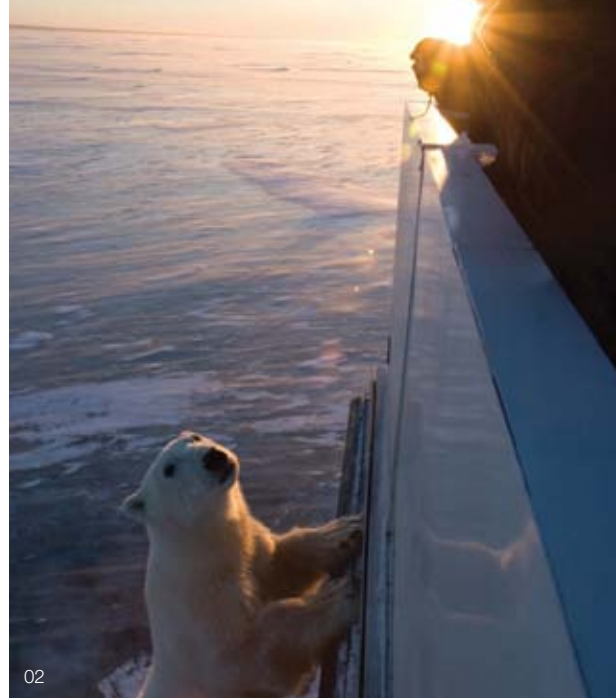
Our guide is biologist Derek Kyostia, who has been taking polar bear tours for four years with The Tundra Buggy Adventure, which operates jointly with Frontiers North Adventures. He says that following the eruption of Mt Pinatubo in the Philippines in 1991, the bears were noticeably fatter because the fallout created a cloud cover that lengthened the melting time of the ice, enabling them to stay out and eat more. "Hudson Bay stayed frozen for an extra month," he says.

### Bear facts

The polar bear (*Ursus maritimus* or 'sea bear') is one of eight bear species, with an estimated Arctic population of between 20,000 and 25,000 – with more than half of them in Canada. Polar bears are also found in Alaska, Greenland, Norway and Russia. The Hudson Bay population of polar bears is the most southern in the world. While the forbidding tundra, incessant icy wind and freezing conditions make us think we are close to the Arctic Circle, we are in fact some 885 kilometres away.

As the largest carnivores in the world, these massive marine mammals can weigh more than 800 kilograms. They can grow up to 2.5 metres long and 1.5m high and when standing on their hind legs can reach up to 4m.

However, the bears' declining population has not daunted nature-lovers from around the world who flock to tiny Churchill each October and November in the hope of seeing them. Then the town's permanent population of 760 can swell to up to 10,000, stretching community facilities to the max. But it is only a six-week migration period when the bears move from their inland summer dens and wait



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05 Sow and Cub

06 Polar bear looking up at passengers on the Tundra Buggy

07 Two Tundra Buggies following a polar bear walking on the snow-covered ground.



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impatiently on the outskirts of town for the bay to freeze over so they can hunt and eat again. Ringed seals are their staple diet, although being opportunistic hunters, they also graze on berries, grasses and kelp that washes up on the isolated beaches.

For some, the smell of the local rubbish dump and the promise of a ready-made meal is too much. While we don't see any bears in or near the town, there are warning signs around the perimeter and numerous stories of recent sightings.

Those caught are impounded in a Polar Bear Holding Facility or 'bear jail' just out of town for several weeks where they are measured and tagged before being transported by helicopter and released some distance away. They are not fed in jail and only given snow to drink. One year the bears were given food and the following year, they returned and broke into jail.

There's nothing much in Churchill. There's a thriving shipping port that exports grain that arrives by kilometre-long trains from Alberta and Saskatchewan but because the bay freezes up, this too is seasonal. There's a hospital, an international airport, a helicopter service that does a brisk business taking visitors out for a closer look at tundra wildlife – think moose and caribou, one hardware store, a supermarket, a clutch of restaurants and several lodges offering modest accommodation. You can spend a few hours learning about local culture at the Eskimo Museum with its fine collection of Inuit artifacts while charismatic Dave Daley operates "Ididamile" dog-sled excursions at Wapusk Adventure Kennels.

Without doubt it's the polar bears who are the celebrities here. See them before it's too late. ●



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#### FOOTNOTES

[www.frontiersnorth.com](http://www.frontiersnorth.com)

[www.polarbearsinternational.org](http://www.polarbearsinternational.org)

[www.worldwildlife.org/species/finder/polarbear/pbi.html](http://www.worldwildlife.org/species/finder/polarbear/pbi.html)