

WARNING!

This article mentions and talks about the act of hunting, animal harvesting, and the collection of animal remains. It may be disturbing or uncomfortable to some. Please read at your own discretion. If you don't like anything, you can disagree, do not hate, you have ZERO reasons to hate on something that you do not fully understand or have never taken a part of.

The information in this article was collected through the Government of Canada, the Government of Ontario, Local Fish and Wildlife Conservation, Inuit hunters, Inuit communities, Hunters, Experienced Taxidermists, and Collectors in the industry. All opinions in this article are personal and do not reflect the opinion of ANY sources above.

Please treat all people and animals with the greatest respect you can give to one.

Introduction

So, first of all, forgive my grammar, English is not my first language, and my writing is pretty bad, but I hope you will still enjoy reading this, about polar bears and how they relate to the Inuit Culture in the northern part of Canada.

Because of their massive size, pure carnivorous appetite, ability to hunt on land and in water, and ability to survive in the coldest and harshest place on Earth, polar bears became the top predator of the Arctic. When I ask people what they know about Polar bears, they usually say something like: "Um...they're going to extinct right? They're starving and eating human garbage because of lack of food? They're drowning because of melting sea ice?". But the truth is far away from most of our understandings.

I'm nowhere near a polar bear researcher or expert, my interest in polar bear facts came from my hobby of collecting animal skulls, and polar bear skulls are extremely fascinating to me, they are just...unique, and amazing. But to be an ethical (and legal of course) collector or an ethical person in every field, you have to learn about the species you're collecting, the laws around them, and our relationship to them in the world. And that's where my understanding about them comes from, the Inuit communities who deal with polar bears in their daily life, and our Fish and Wildlife Office, can provide us with the most accurate and up-to-date information and regulation laws regarding these magnificent animals.

Polar Bears in Canada

We have about 16000 polar bears within Canada, and nearly all of them live in the Nunavut and Northwest Territories. Same as grizzlies and black bears, polar bears give birth to 1-4 cubs at a time, but cubs live with their mom until about 2 years old and they are off on their own. After mating, the male polar bear does not take care of the mother or the younglings, the mother gives birth in a den and takes care of the babies all by herself, she also teaches the young polar bears basic survival skills like hunting and fishing. Here is a myth-buster: We see on documentaries when a polar bear is killing and eating a young polar bear, the narrator or description usually says: Polar bears killing their youth because they're hungry due to lack of sea ice therefore they cannot hunt. That is entirely fake, the real reason behind this is: Female polar bears do not mate when they are raising cubs, which can last about 2 years. Therefore male polar bears that want to mate will attack the female, kill her cubs and force her to mate, this can happen even if the cubs are his own offspring, as male polar bears usually cannot identify their own offspring. People argue by saying this does not happen in captivity because there's enough food, but that is false. In captivity, polar bears get stressed out easily because of frequent guests. These especially rude guests use camera flashes when taking a photo, pound on the glass, yell/speak loudly to them, and have their kids scream, etc. Most importantly, the biggest stressor for these bears is a lack of space. Wild polar bears can travel up to 3000km a year, and have territories that are about 20,000 square miles. It's like making a large dog live in a crate that it can barely turn around in, this results in stressful behaviors like aggression toward its offspring.

The Inuit people

The ancestors of the Inuit have been in the Arctic about 6000 years ago already, the Inuit moved into northern Canada around 800-1000 years ago from Alaska. In the Arctic, food is extremely hard to come by, and the living condition can be described as cruel, the temperature easily reaching -60C in the winter, and barely going past 0C in the summer. Even in the modern days, what we find in our groceries stores easily are luxuries to them, with a bottle of milk costing \$15-20, canned food priced at \$8-9 per can, a small can of salmon costing \$12, even a bag of Lays potato chips costing \$33, food is unaffordable.

And with limited transportation and access to their area, the Inuit are left with barely any way to work and struggle to make money for a living.

Lack of income and connection to the outside world means the only way Inuit people survive in these harsh conditions while building a rich culture is through hunting, and the hunting of polar bears has been an inseparable part of their culture for thousands of years. Polar bears provide them with pelts to keep them warm, food to feed the community, and inspiration for their culture and survival. Inuit communities can also choose to trade the fur and skulls of the animals harvested, providing them with the money to purchase some essential grocery needs. Some organizations are strongly suggesting (and supporting) the ban on polar bear harvesting, which to me, looks very ignorant and immature. Organizations that want to ban something will never consider the situation of people that will be directly affected by this decision, which in this case, the Inuit communities that rely on polar bears as an important source of food and survival. Polar bears represent resilience, intelligence, and unpredictable danger, just like how they survive as the top predator in the Arctic.

The Impact of Social Media on Polar Bears

Because of researchers from the south publish heavily misinformed documents about polar bears, heavily flooding social media, and including videos showing a skinny, trembling bear as “starved to death because of lack of food”, which again, is entirely made up. First of all, the loss of sea ice will never starve polar bears to death, they are amazing swimmers and hunters underwater, and the use of sea ice simply gives them an easier chance to stalk and jump a seal. Second of all, a polar bear may starve if it is trying to survive in a group where larger, territorial adults are dominating over sub-adult younger bears that are smaller and weaker. The polar bear in the said video was either an old bear that was reaching the end of its life cycle, or was sick/injured preventing it from hunting. Polar bears can easily get injured from fighting for territory or mating rights. Sometimes resulting in terrible wounds like a bone fracture or cracked tooth, which can easily prevent a bear to hunt and eat. Common diseases in wild animals also happen to polar bears, the result is the same. It is extremely unlikely, or near impossible, for an adult bear to starve to death. Due to their ability to survive in the harsh Arctic, polar bears can easily go for 7-8 months without any food intake and a female pregnant polar bear can go for a year without food when she’s in a den ready to give birth to her cubs.

Anti-hunting organizations are strongly supporting the ban on polar bear harvesting, which to me, looks very ignorant and immature. Organizations that want to ban something will never consider the situation of people that will be directly affected by this decision, which in this case, the Inuit communities that rely on polar bears as an important source of culture, food, and survival. They show greater respect for polar bears than any researcher in other parts of the world, which is also the reason why they dislike researchers coming to study polar bears because most of them will get twisted and turned into lies. Rule number one to something you truly, from the bottom of your heart, deeply respect? Never spread propaganda, using it as a method to gain profit, or lie about it.

When you see a video or photo with a polar bear, or a group of them, flipping through human garbage looking for food, with a title like Starving polar bears have to dig human garbage to find food. Pretty believable, right? But again, the truth is the opposite. Polar bears are extremely smart and cautious animals, normally they will try their best to stay far from human lands or becomes extremely aggressive when humans approach. but like every other bear, they can easily adapt to human presence if being offered food, being fed often can reduce their caution towards humans because now, human presence = free food! This can be done by feeding polar bears on purpose or careless littering. As they are being fed often, they are no longer afraid of humans and are actually willing to come near human lands. This can lead to many dangerous consequences, from them being too close to humans while still being carnivorous predators and causing public safety issues, to them ingesting garbage like plastic and other artificial stuff that are deadly to them. Even worse, if cubs are being fed, they will return very

frequently as they turn adults too. Even though feeding polar bears is strictly prohibited, people still do it to snap those photos and post misleading information, the reason behind this is simple too. Profit, a sad story with sad photos is more likely to attract viewers and therefore earn more profit. People will pay more attention to a sad photo/video titled: "Starving bear due to global warming" instead of "Illegal feeding of polar bears are making them less and less cautious towards human activity". They are not there because they are starving, they are there because there's free food.

Polar Bears and the Act of Hunting

In the 1950s-the 2000s, polar bear hunting was one of the most popular sports/trophy hunting, every year, thousands of rich USA trophy hunters went to Alaska to hunt a polar bear as a "trophy", the USA banned polar bear sports hunting in Alaska in 1972, so the trophy hunters turned to Canada. Trophy hunting became such a big problem that polar bear numbers went down to nearly 5000. It was not until 2008 when the importation of Polar bear remains into the USA was completely banned, and the trophy hunting rush of polar bears in Alaska was finally put to a stop.

The Inuit treats polar bear with the greatest respect, they make sure every animal they harvest are treated with the greatest respect and zero loss, and the act of trophy hunting and killing for fun is entirely against their culture. Even today, the majority of Inuit are still against the act of trophy hunting. Luckily, the ban on the USA importation of polar bear remains reduced trophy hunting by 73%, and this number never went back up. To this day, despite many laws banning the importation of different animal trophies around the world, the USA still has the highest number of trophy hunters in the world. While killing for fun and trophy is not an ethical activity, statistics and long-term studies have clearly shown that if the money goes to the right place, trophy hunting is actually critical in some places in the world for the conservation of the animals, especially in heavy trophy hunting with extremely corrupted government countries in Africa. When the money is used to protect the species, help the locals and stop poachers, letting one go for trophy hunting while being able to protect the rest isn't the worst. However, in some cases when the corrupted officials snatch the money for themselves, it does the exact opposite. Hunters' role in the conservation of wildlife is critical, every hunter's behavior in the wild, in the public, and around people change others' thoughts about the act of hunting. Bad and unethical hunters should always be called out and punished by law, and if you are a hunter yourself, please, be ethical, be respectful, and always, try your best to achieve Zero Loss!

Zero Loss is one of the biggest respect a hunter can give to the harvested animal, aside from an ethical shot to instantly bring the animal down and avoid any pain, stress, or discomfort to the animal. Another ethical decision would be to not litter when you're out there, and bring bags to collect any garbage, empty cartridge, and bullets you find on the ground. Zero loss is to ensure every single bit of the animal was put to use and nothing goes to waste. There's a story of a Canadian hunter, he would keep all the fat and oil of bears, which most people throw away, as excellent water repellent and insect repellent, putting it all over his body and his clothes. Of course, he smells, really bad, but everyone loves hanging out with him and gives him a lot of respect.

Polar bear harvesting in Canada

In Canada, the harvesting of polar bears is done through a provincially controlled quota system. It was established in the 1970s to control the harvesting of polar bears, making sure the Inuit traditions are protected while protecting them from being over-trophy hunted. Each Inuit community receives a limited number of bear tags every year, each tag can only be used once for one bear, the number of tags distributed reflects the local bear population, and every year the province will study the data to ensure the system is kept sustainable, and so far, it has been proven very successful. For every harvested bear, a sample of skin, tooth, or hair is provided to calculate this data,

ensuring the quota system is closely monitored and strictly controlled. Inuit communities can decide how to use these tags themselves but no more than 50% of the tags can be used for guided hunting.

Guided hunting is basically like trophy hunting, but more strictly regulated. Hunting has to be done with a licensed Inuit guide, the hunt is conducted in traditional ways, including using the dog team for transportation. After the hunt is finished, polar bear meat must stay within the community, making sure Zero Loss is achieved. While guided hunting is still disliked by some as it is still an act of trophy hunting, it provides extremely important income for some communities where other sources of income are heavily limited. Aside from guided hunting, Inuit communities can also export and sell the pelts and skulls of polar bears they harvested for income.

What really threatens polar bears?

Many things affect polar bears, the biggest 3 problems are Climate Change, Toxic Pollution, and Oil Exploration. Climate change results in the loss of sea ice, reducing the population of seals and less convenient for polar bears to hunt them. Pollution due to human activities and industries are affecting their health and their ability to produce healthy babies. And the third and coming the soonest, Oil Exploration. If oil and gas industries continue to push towards the north, polar bears can face massive habitat loss, poisoning due to chemicals and waste, and disturbance due to factories' operations. An oil leak can also be extremely dangerous and affect a large area, and there's currently no method or solution to effectively and quickly clear a large amount of oil in the arctic ocean. Harvesting polar bears, unlike what's being widely said on social media and articles, is strictly controlled and nowhere near the current big problems pushing polar bears towards extinction. Poaching a polar bear within Canada is difficult, but exists, because of the fur industry's demand, the demand within Canada is rather low, but in oversea countries, especially in China, where polar bear carpets symbolize wealth and power and is very popular among the riches, the demand is extremely high. To stop illegal activities of poaching, the Canadian wildlife conservation officers are doing their best, using advanced methods like DNA testing and an advanced tracking system for every pelt exported, making sure every one of them is recorded and tagged. However, in Russia, where about 4000 polar bears live, because of a lack of regulation and laws, and the lack of Wildlife conservation officers, the poaching of polar bears happens very frequently, about 100-150 bears in Russia are poached every year to be sold to its next door neighbor, China, where they get made into carpets and wall mounts to be displayed in the wealthy homes.

What you can do to help polar bears

The classic thinking process here is obviously: "Even if I do something it barely matters." But that is not true, by trying to make a difference, you inspire people around you to do the same. I was very successful in convincing my family, my partner, and my friends to reduce their own carbon footprint, things like using decomposable garbage bags, buying local products, avoiding products with tons of packaging, and recycling things (talking about actually cleaning a used plastic cup, or take a paper box apart then recycle it)...They are all tiny but important things that can make a difference when more people are doing them. Of course...you can always donate to an organization, but make sure you are donating to one that's ACTUALLY putting the money to use! Not the ones that will just end up snatching your money into their own pockets. (or use it to buy fancy massage chairs for their headquarter!)

If you are an animal oddities collector like me, for any animal you're collecting, even if it's the most common ones out there, do your best to research about them, learn about their conservation laws, learn about your local laws, and make sure that whatever you get, it's legally AND ethically obtained! Any efforts made to stop and prevent the illegal trafficking of protected species should be greatly appreciated.