

THE “POLAR BEAR JAIL”

Inside the Polar Bear Alert Program

ABSTRACT

The Polar Bear Alert Program exemplifies a comprehensive approach to wildlife conservation, focusing on prevention, detention, and release to safeguard both polar bears and human communities.

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Introduction

Sometimes in photography, luck finds you! One morning in Churchill, I had the rare chance to photograph a pair of polar bears being prepared for their return to the wilderness. But what thrilled me most was capturing the care and concern of a young technician as she kept watch over this massive apex predator, who lay quietly tranquilized beside her.



She is a Resource Management Technician with Manitoba Natural Resources and Northern Development, one of the specialists who handle the daily, hands-on work of the Polar Bear Holding Facility, better known as the Polar Bear Jail. Her duties include answering the 24-hour bear hotline, setting traps, working with animals under sedation, recording biological data and keeping the facility running. She spends her days around some of the most dangerous animals on Earth, yet in this frame she looks like someone keeping watch over a friend.

That photograph inspired me to write this story about the Polar Bear Jail. It made me want to understand the people behind the program, and maybe even produce a short documentary …

The Crew



Five people worked the landing zone. Two of her colleagues soon arrived with a snowmobile and cart, picked up the second bear and drove it to the transfer zone. The ground team are the Jail's own staff, Conservation Officers and Resource Management Technicians. The Officers are armed, uniformed peace officers who patrol Churchill around the clock. The technicians prepare each bear for transport, secure it in a heavy-duty cargo net and hook the sling to the bottom of the helicopter. The aircraft is a separate operation. The province doesn't keep its own helicopters in Churchill, so it contracts private aviation companies and their pilots. Jail staff and flight crew work together, each doing a very different job.

Why Churchill Arrests Polar Bears

I spent two hours watching the whole operation from start to finish, and it left me with a question: how did a small northern town come to run a jail for polar bears? As the helicopter turned toward Hudson Bay, carrying both bears back to the ice, I realized the answer was a story worth telling in full.

In addition to capturing some amazing images, I was able to take my time and witness it in person. What follows is the history of the Polar Bear Alert Program, how it works and the people behind it. I'm also looking into the permits needed to capture the action from inside the "jail," and I'm looking forward to my return!

The History of the Polar Bear Alert Program

The Polar Bear Alert Program (PBA) has played a critical role in managing human-polar bear interactions in Churchill, Manitoba. This initiative, steeped in history, reflects the community's commitment to safety and coexistence with these majestic Arctic predators.

The Polar Bear Alert Program was created in response to an increasing number of polar bears frequenting the Churchill area. As a gateway to the Arctic, Churchill's proximity to polar bear habitats posed unique challenges for both residents and wildlife, necessitating a structured response to ensure the safety of all involved.

The Early Days: 1969 to 1983



The program began in 1969 under the name "Polar Bear Control Program." Its early efforts focused on reducing human-bear conflicts through monitoring and deterrent measures.

In 1978, the program took on a new identity as the "Polar Bear Alert" initiative. This name change coincided with the introduction of fluorescent orange "Polar Bear Alert" signs, which were placed in high-risk areas, such as the rocks behind the main town complex. Additionally, a dedicated phone line was established for residents to report polar bear sightings. Over the years, the term "Polar Bear Alert" gained widespread recognition, and by 1983, the entire program officially adopted this name.

The Polar Bear Holding Facility

A significant milestone in the program's history was the development of the Polar Bear

Holding Facility. Originally built in the 1950s as storage building "D-20" at the Fort Churchill Military Base, it was acquired by the Manitoba provincial government in 1979. Construction of holding cells began shortly thereafter, and the facility first held polar bears in 1981. By 1982, it became fully operational, providing a humane and effective way to manage polar bears that ventured too close to the town.

Encounters and Challenges



Despite the program's proactive measures, polar bear encounters remain a reality for the residents of Churchill. Since its inception, there have been two fatalities due to polar bear attacks: one in 1968, just before the program's official launch, and another in 1983. Close encounters occur almost annually, and in some instances, polar bears are shot in self-defense. The most recent serious incident occurred in 2013 when two

individuals were injured during an attack. Over the decades, the Polar Bear Alert Program has evolved into a cornerstone of Churchill's community and wildlife management strategy. By combining public awareness, advanced facilities, and a commitment to safety, the program ensures that both humans and polar bears can coexist in this unique Arctic region.

The Mission of the Polar Bear Alert Program

The Polar Bear Alert Program (PBA) is essential for managing human-polar bear interactions in Churchill, Manitoba. To achieve its mission, the program focuses on five main objectives and implements a strategic approach to managing polar bear activity through defined control zones.



The Five Objectives of the Polar Bear Alert Program

Protecting Human Life: Ensuring the safety of Churchill's residents and visitors is the program's highest priority. Quick response protocols are in place to mitigate risks posed by polar bears in the area.

Protecting Polar Bears: The program works to prevent unnecessary deaths or harassment of polar bears, emphasizing humane management techniques.

Ensuring Staff Safety: Safeguarding the health and well-being of staff working with the Polar Bear Alert Program is a crucial component. Staff undergo rigorous training to handle encounters effectively.

Minimizing Property Damage: Reducing the impact of polar bears on residential and commercial properties in the Churchill area helps maintain harmony between humans and wildlife.

Preventing Food Conditioning and Human Habituation: The program aims to minimize the chances of polar bears associating humans with food, reducing the likelihood of repeated interactions.

The 'Team'

The Polar Bear Alert Program is staffed with two Conservation Officers, a wildlife

biologist, one district clerk, four seasonal resource management technicians, and additional staff when required during the peak season. To effectively manage polar bear activity, the Churchill area is divided into three control zones:



Zone One: Town Site and

Immediate Vicinity ○ This zone includes the main town and its immediate surroundings. ○ It has the strictest protocols, with PBA staff responding immediately to any reports of polar bear sightings.

Zone Two: Inhabited Areas Outside of Town ○ These areas are road-accessible but less densely populated than Zone One.

PBA staff monitor and address polar bear activity as needed to ensure safety.

Zone Three: Peripheral Areas

Adjacent to Zones One and Two, this area encompasses the broader region where polar bears may roam.

- Monitoring and management efforts are more relaxed here compared to the higher-priority zones.

The Polar Bear Alert Program balances the safety of human life, the welfare of polar bears, and the preservation of property. By prioritizing these objectives and implementing a zoned control system, the program ensures a proactive and effective response to the challenges of human-polar bear coexistence in Churchill.

The Polar Bear Alert Program

The Polar Bear Alert Program (PBA) is an essential initiative that protects both the residents of Churchill and the polar bears that occasionally venture near or into town. Here's how the program operates to ensure safety and coexistence. Some polar bears do wander into Churchill. Most sightings are near the town, especially along the Hudson Bay coast. While a few polar bears enter town during the daytime, it's more common to spot them at night. When bears are seen, PBA staff or the public report their locations, and the bears are promptly chased out of town using the shortest route possible.

The Polar Bear Alert Program operates a 24-hour emergency phone line at **204-675-BEAR**. Residents or visitors can call this number to report a polar bear sighting. Staff immediately respond to these calls. In addition, PBA staff conduct regular patrols throughout the town and surrounding areas:

Daytime Patrols: Scheduled during key times to ensure the safety of school children in the morning, at noon, and in the afternoon.

Fall Morning Patrols: A 7:00 A.M. patrol clears the town of any polar bears before pedestrian activity begins.

Polar Bear Activity in Churchill is Seasonal:

Winter: Polar bears spend these months feeding on seals on the frozen Hudson Bay.

Spring and Summer: As the ice melts, polar bears come ashore, usually between late June and early August.

Fall: The busiest time for polar bear sightings is the first three weeks of November, as bears wait for Hudson Bay to freeze over again.

Late November: Once the ice is thick enough, polar bears return to the bay to hunt seals.



The Polar Bear Alert Program involves public education through presentations about safety and awareness Signs are put up in areas along the coast and edge of town that are considered high potential of polar bears occurring, as well as poor sight lines to see bears approaching.

Some Practical Advice

It is important to always be alert and aware of your surroundings at all times of the year, and especially during the bear season.

Walking with a group of people is safer than walking alone.

The chance of encountering a polar bear in town is greatest at night, so people should be even more cautious at that time.

The use of a vehicle is safer than walking. Churchill does have a taxi service.

If you hear truck horns honking or scare cartridges being fired in town, do not walk towards the sound as a polar bear may be nearby. Instead, look for a safe place to go in case a polar bear is coming your way.

Preventing Polar Bears from Entering Town

The Polar Bear Alert Program takes proactive measures to minimize bear incursions:

Reducing Attractants: Staff work with the Town of Churchill to ensure garbage is managed effectively. Bearproof bins and timely garbage removal reduce the chances of attracting polar bears.



Live Traps: During the fall or periods of heightened bear activity, live traps are set around the community's edges to intercept bears before they enter town.

By combining constant vigilance, public reporting, and preventative measures, the Polar Bear Alert Program successfully minimizes conflicts between humans and polar bears, fostering a safer environment for all.

Trapping the Bears …

The Polar Bear Alert Program employs innovative and humane methods to prevent polar bears from entering Churchill, Manitoba. One of the most effective tools in this effort is the use of live traps, designed to safely capture and relocate polar bears that venture too close to the community. Polar bear traps are custom-built, liveholding devices crafted from large metal culverts mounted onto trailers. Each trap is designed with:



A Heavy Metal Screen: Welded securely onto one end of the culvert to ensure the bear remains safely contained.

A Door Mechanism: Mounted on the other end, allowing staff to release the bear into a holding facility.

The traps are baited with seal meat attached to a trigger mechanism. When a polar bear enters the trap and pulls on the bait, the door drops down, safely enclosing the bear inside the trap.

Relocating Captured Polar Bears

Once a polar bear is captured, it is transported to the Polar Bear Holding Facility for secure handling. Here's how the transfer process works:

Positioning the Trap: The trap is backed up to the door of an individual holding cell and securely chained to the wall.

Opening the Cell Door: The cell door is partially opened to create a visible space for the bear to enter.

Releasing the Bear: The trap door is raised, and the polar bear, seeing the larger space of the cell, exits the trap and enters the holding cell.

Securing the Cell: Once the bear is inside, the cell door is lowered and securely locked.

The Importance of Live Traps

These live traps are crucial in minimizing human-polar bear conflicts. By capturing and safely relocating bears, the program protects both the bears and the residents of Churchill. This humane method ensures that polar bears are managed responsibly while maintaining their natural behaviors and habitats.

The use of live traps is just one of the many proactive measures taken by the Polar Bear Alert Program to foster coexistence between humans and polar bears in this unique Arctic community.

Inside the Polar Bear Jail

The Polar Bear Holding Facility, often referred to as the "polar bear jail," is a cornerstone of the Polar Bear Alert Program. It provides a safe and controlled environment for polar bears that wander too close to the town of Churchill, Manitoba. Here's how it works and what life inside the facility entails.

Intake and Record Keeping

When a bear is admitted, it undergoes a thorough health and condition assessment. The process includes:



Recording the bear's general condition, health, and capture details.

Measuring the bear's length, chest girth, and fat index (rated 1-5).

Weighing the bear upon entry and exit.

Administering ear tags and a unique lip tattoo if the bear is being handled for the first time.

Extracting a premolar tooth and collecting tissue samples for lab analysis to confirm the bear's age and maintain comprehensive records.

All data is logged into a database that includes every bear ever captured by the program.

Duration of Stay

The length of time a polar bear spends in the facility varies based on factors like space availability, capture location, and weather conditions. Typically, bears captured in Zone One are held for around 30 days to minimize the likelihood of them returning to the area and to prevent food conditioning. Family groups are relocated as quickly as possible. Bears that are recaptured in the same season may be held until the ice forms on Hudson Bay and then released alongside others at the end of the season. The bears in the facility are not fed. They are provided with clean water or snow to sustain them, as polar bears naturally survive on fat reserves from the previous hunting season while in a state of walking hibernation. Feeding the bears would risk conditioning them to associate humans with food, undermining the program's efforts.



A Humane Approach

The Polar Bear Holding Facility demonstrates a balanced approach to managing humanwildlife interactions. By providing a secure environment and prioritizing the bears' natural behaviors, the program ensures the safety of both Churchill's residents and its iconic Arctic visitors.

Releasing the Bears from the Polar Bear Jail

Pre-Ice Release

Releasing polar bears from the Polar Bear Holding Facility is a carefully managed process that ensures their safe return to the wild. This operation aligns with the natural behaviors of the bears and minimizes the chances of them returning to Churchill.

Before the Hudson Bay ice freezes, polar bears are tranquilized and translocated by helicopter approximately 70 kilometers north of Churchill. They are released along the Hudson Bay coast, allowing them to continue their migration toward the first ice forming on the bay. Since sea ice forms earliest along the western and northern coastline of Churchill, this direction aligns with the bears'

natural instincts.

At the time of release, bears are marked with a green wax spot on their shoulder hump. This temporary marker allows easy recognition of released bears from a distance. The mark naturally wears off within a month as the bears clean themselves and spend time in the water. Very few bears return to Churchill during the same season after being relocated.



Once ice forms on Hudson Bay, the remaining bears in the facility are released directly onto the shoreline by vehicle. Transported in culvert traps, these bears are eager to return to the ice to hunt seals. This method ensures a smooth transition back into their natural habitat.

Program Impact

Since the facility's inception in 1981, over 2,300 polar bears have been handled by the Polar Bear Alert Program. While not all bears were held in the facility—some, like family groups, were flown directly out—the program's efforts have significantly contributed to minimizing human-polar bear conflicts.

Approximately two-thirds of the polar bears handled are previously tagged. These tags are from either the Polar Bear Alert Program or the Canadian Wildlife Service's research initiatives. Only a small number of relocated bears return to Churchill within the same year, highlighting the success of the program's relocation strategies.

The careful release and monitoring of polar bears ensure their well-being while maintaining safety for the residents of Churchill, fostering a harmonious coexistence between humans and wildlife.

My Final Thoughts …

This experience left a far greater impact on me than I ever expected. What began as another polar bear adventure turned into a deeper appreciation for the people working behind the scenes to protect both the bears and the community of Churchill. Seeing the care, respect, and emotion the team brought to their work changed the way I looked at wildlife conservation and storytelling through photography. I'm truly grateful I had the opportunity to document the Polar Bear Holding Facility, and I hope someday I'll return to Churchill, see the bears again, and maybe even reconnect with the incredible team whose dedication inspired this story.