

About a bear: wildlife tourism in the Polar North

Dr Lizanne Henderson, School of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Glasgow

***Ursus maritimus*, the polar bear, is symbolic of the North and an icon of anthropogenic climate change. Everyone from NGOs to tour operators uses images of Nanuq to attract clientele; the bear elicits feelings of awe and is, for most wildlife-seekers, a 'bucket-list' animal. The polar bear has become the 'poster child' for global warming, giving a 'face' to complex scientific issues. But how effective have these (mostly negative) images actually been, and at what expense? While the sight of emaciated bears struggling on melting ice appeals to our emotions, do these depictions actually encourage understanding about broader Arctic conservation and the people who live there?**



From the 1880s, steamers sailed to Svalbard offering tourists the chance to experience the Midnight Sun, while some offered passengers the opportunity to hunt wildlife, including bears. Today, Svalbard is still a prime location for Arctic cruising, generally viewed within the industry as a success story.

With ever-increasing media attention given

to the Arctic, some tour operators have plugged so-called 'last chance tourism'. Needless to say, the Arctic is a big place and so tourism growth is uneven, mainly concentrated around more accessible areas, such as Scandinavia and Alaska, which can collectively attract over two million visitors annually, while the Canadian territory Nunavut brings in only 15,000 per year. One to watch is Greenland, which has been heavily investing in developing its infrastructure – proposals are currently under discussion for three new airports and several harbours – though some have warned there has been inadequate discussion about tourism impacts and carrying capacity.

Reduction of sea ice has been a boon for cruise ship tourism – the first luxury liner *Crystal Serenity* took over 1,000 guests on a 32-day voyage through the Northwest Passage in 2016 – but is less welcomed by the bears who depend upon the ice to hunt. There have been notable increases in bear-human conflict for local people and within the tourism sector. In Greenland in 2014, 12 bears were shot by locals in self-defence, the highest figure ever recorded, while in Svalbard in 2018, a bear was killed after it injured a guard helping tourists off the cruise ship *MS Bremen*.

Wildlife tourism is globally on the rise, promoted as an economic regenerator that supports local communities as well as aiding in conservation. Wildlife encounters via tourism inevitably carry some level of impact, though it is not an easy thing to measure. There are guidelines available, such as AECO whose members are obliged to operate in accordance with international law and to observe considerate conduct. Reputable tour companies will observe such guidelines, minimizing stressors to the animal, but

in wilderness areas this is often based on a trust system.

The 'polar bear capital of the world', Churchill (Kuugjuaq), Manitoba, situated on the western edge of Canada's Hudson Bay, attracts 10,000 visitors every autumn for guaranteed sightings of the bears as they wait for the sea ice to freeze. Tourist impact is minimized by using specially designed tundra vehicles for 'up-close and personal' encounters. While the carbon footprint for getting to Churchill is high, the town has started to offset these emissions by implementing carbon-neutral programs and offering eco-friendly accommodation. While Churchill is making concerted efforts to promote responsible wildlife tourism, elsewhere the picture is less clear. Kaktovik, Alaska, for instance, which has witnessed an overall decrease in polar bear numbers but an extension in the time bears spend near the town due to delayed sea ice, is experiencing a dramatic rise in tourists. Permits for commercial viewing of bears (issued by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service) rose from one to 19 between 2010 and 2016, while the annual number of tourists went from around

50 to 2,500. Unscrupulous practices, such as attracting bears with food from the back of tour boats or approaching the bears too closely, have been reported.

Before becoming too cynical, there are positive aspects to wildlife tourism ventures: employment



"Reduction of sea ice has been a boon for cruise ship tourism but is less welcomed by the bears who depend upon the ice to hunt."

and income generation, increased protection for threatened species or fragile landscapes through private or government funding, the creation of national parks and nature reserves, educational benefits and awareness-raising, not to mention

the inestimable pleasure of spending time in the presence of wild animals and untamed landscapes.

With over 20 years' experience working with tour company Adventure Canada, I have been privileged to see polar bears in the wild and observe tourist responses to these magnificent creatures. My involvement as a guide has led me to wonder whether wildlife tourism can change attitudes, or have any lasting behavioural impacts on the participants. My current research project, *Picturing Polar Bears: Tourism, Climate Change and Environmental Education: Impacts and Perceptions in Arctic Expeditionary Travel*, asks, do wildlife encounters leave a social or environmental legacy? Is it possible that responsible Arctic tourism could play a role in decelerating global warming? For the bear, and all our sakes, let us hope so.