

FIELD GUIDE

On the ground with nanuq



Environmental groups often use polar bears (nanuq in Inuktitut) as the face of climate change for a global audience. But for northern peoples, like Frank Pokiak, polar bears are a part of everyday life. Here, Frank, Chair of the Inuvialuit Game Council, talks about the importance of polar bears to local communities and the importance of local knowledge to the polar bear's future.

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For generations, Inuit and Inuvialuit of Canada's North have lived alongside polar bears, developing a strong respect for and knowledge of the species. The polar bear's cultural importance as a source of art, stories, and identity has long been recognized. But they also have a more practical and basic value to people's lives.

"Polar bears are a food source," says Frank Pokiak, an experienced Inuvialuit hunter from the coastal community of Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories. "Some people make some income out of it, from selling the hides. The money helps them buy food and clothing for their families." Meat from polar bears

and other Arctic wildlife is central to the traditional diet, and hunting is an important part of life in the North.

Northerners have a huge stake in keeping polar bears a part of the Arctic ecosystem. And, with their generations of knowledge and experience, they also play a critical role in managing these populations.

"Our 1984 land claim agreement gave us responsibility for managing our wildlife. We

take it really seriously. We don't want to deplete species that we harvest and use; we want to see them there for generations to come," Frank explains.

The traditional knowledge that has guided north-

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ern peoples for thousands of years hasn't always been taken seriously by the scientific community. "Traditional knowledge is spoken, not written," says Frank. "It can be hard to share it with the outside world. Scientists need to listen."

Today, researchers increasingly recognize the important role that local communities and expertise must play in management. "Science and traditional knowledge are different and valuable ways of knowing," says Geoff York, WWF polar bear expert. "We need to sit down and have open, honest conversations to listen and learn from one another." WWF is funding a new polar bear denning study that involves the collection and synthesis of scientific information and traditional knowledge in order to map all known polar bear denning habitat in Nunavut.

The Inuvialuit are working on an in-depth traditional knowledge study to document elders' and hunters' knowledge about polar bears and ice conditions. The fruits of that labour could prove invaluable to polar bear researchers like Geoff, as well as to future generations of Inuvialuit. "We're committed to the research," says Frank. "We're sharing our knowledge to help show everyone how it is for the polar bears." ●

Did you know? Canada may have some of the most resilient ice habitat in the world for polar bears and other ice-dependent species. WWF aims to work with local communities and governments to conserve this "Last Ice Area" for the future of wildlife and people. Find out more at www.wwf.ca/arctichome.



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