

Lunch With a Polar Bear: Reflections on Entangled Interspecies Relations

I had lunch with a polar bear in Churchill, Manitoba, last October. A ridiculous image, perhaps. But when the encounter was actually happening, “lunch with a polar” was the phrasing I first grasped. “I can’t believe I’m having lunch with a polar bear...,” I thought to myself. And I still haven’t come up with a better way to express it. We don’t really have the right vocabulary to convey the complexities and particularities of so many interspecies encounters.

I travelled to Churchill last October to see polar bears. This is how I was able to enjoy such a lunch experience. I wanted to see polar bears, but I also wanted to learn about them, and learn about the people who interact with them, and about those interactions. I wanted to get closer to the bears but I also wanted to get closer to polar bear research.

Wildlife photography was the spark that ignited my fascination with polar bears so many years ago. But it was the polar bear’s role as climate change mascot that added a sense of urgency to my desire. In this sense my desire for a “real” bear encounter corresponds with what scholars have termed “last chance” tourism – “a phenomenon where tourists seek out disappearing landscapes and/or natural and social features” (Groulx et al. 1524), or, more simply, “see it before it’s gone tourism” (Dawson et al., 2010, 330).¹

¹ “[R]esearch examining human–wildlife interactions (Davenport et al., 2002; Hammitt & Wells, 1993; Martin, 1997; Vaske et al., 2001), illustrates how wildlife is socially constructed, and indicates how these malleable concepts are often influenced by changing social whims or media awareness” (Lemelin, 2006, 518).

Despite some media-fueled “last chance” urgency, and my longstanding fascination with polar bears, it took many years before I finally made my way up to Churchill, Manitoba, joining a “Lords of the Arctic” “learning vacation” offered by the Churchill Northern Studies Centre. Today’s presentation is a reflection on my ‘learning vacation’ experience, and on the entangled interspecies relations it entailed.

1. Polar bears can look deceptively cute but they are dangerous animals.

A visitor arriving in Churchill, Manitoba, is likely to learn this fact quickly and to be reminded often. There is a difference between *knowing* a polar bear is dangerous and *understanding* that danger and what it means.

Even if you were to arrive in Churchill with no background knowledge and no official tour guide to meet you, the warnings on numerous notices, signs and even bumper stickers make the danger hard to miss. In Churchill, polar bears are serious business. As “Polar Bear Capital of the World” Churchill relies heavily on the economic value of wildlife tourism² in which the polar bears feature as a starring act (even more so since the shutdown of the Port of Churchill only last year). This means that tourism businesses and tour operators in Churchill have added incentive to make sure vacationers know how dangerous polar bears can be and how close at

² “Wildlife tourism is a form of tourism that includes viewing animals in various settings including safaris, zoos, private reserves, and protected areas (Desmond, 1999; Newsome et al., 2005). Associated activities can include observation and photography of wildlife (Hammit & Wells, 1993), looking for signs of wildlife (e.g. tracks) (Wilson & Heberlein, 1996), or learning about wildlife and other ecological issues (Higginbottom, 2005; Russell & Hodson, 2002).” (Lemelin, 2006, 516)

hand that danger lies.³ A heightened awareness of human–polar bear relations is necessary for keeping research facilities, businesses, employees and guests alive.

Should tourists not be able to process the threat posed by polar bears or underestimate their own vulnerability to attack, tour operators have another card to play – the safety *of* the bears. Visitors are cautioned that keeping humans and bears apart, with few exceptions, is essential to bear protection. In Churchill, bears who come too close to people are first warned off. If they stick around, and if they're fortunate, they are trapped, then held, then airlifted away. When a bear is *unlucky* and killed it's usually because a human has done something stupid – at least that's the impression created by the tour operators I encountered. Presuming that tourists to Churchill care about the well-being of the bears they've come to see, the double meaning of the phrase "polar bear safety" can come in handy.

2. How to safely see bears.

The primary and predominant means of seeing polar bears is to go on a "Tundra Buggy" or "Polar Rover" outing into the Churchill Wildlife Management Area. If you haven't seen a Buggy or Rover, try to picture something like a monster truck version of a school bus. These vehicles are extra wide and extra tall, and manufactured specifically for use on the tundra. The huge tires help the vehicles navigate the worst stretches of a rough set of trails but they also help keep visitors well above polar bear height. Heavy windows that only open from the top offer another 30-40cm of protection. We were allowed outside on an open deck at the rear of the Rover, but

³ During my trip one tourist joked about disregarding safety procedures only to be quickly and loudly chastised.

even here tourists are safely above polar bear height. Polar bears are crafty but they're also economically-minded, and won't waste their energy trying to catch a meal that doesn't offer enough calories to be worth the effort.

Our guides assured us that the presence of tour buggies doesn't seem to bother the bears. In fact, they tended to grant the polar bears a degree of agency in these encounters, suggesting that if the bears wanted to avoid us there was plenty of available land they could explore out of sight of the buggy trails. Still, drivers made an effort not to startle or disturb the bears we spotted – moving the vehicle slowly while encouraging us to be quiet as well. The bears seemed aware of us, some more than others, but for the most part they ignored us, making the few moments of active interest all the more striking.

3. Constructing the bear encounter.

My Churchill learning vacation was a full week long, but we took just two Rover trips into the Wildlife Management Area. Bear outings are expensive, and surprisingly tiring. There's also the risk that repeated outings could transform novelty into routine. With so few available trails and the hungry bears conserving their energy, seeing *more* could mean seeing more of the *same*.

Polar bear watching from a Rover or Buggy is, of course, a highly constructed experience. Beyond basic safety procedures and the strict guidelines dictating where we could go and when, a great deal of planning and organization goes into each outing in an effort to guarantee the customer a satisfying view. Because my tourist group was among the first of the season, when the bears were just beginning to gather around the shores of Hudson Bay, even the timing of our outings was

carefully planned – scheduled later in the week in the hope that more bears would then be hanging about.⁴

The orchestration of my polar bear watching experience corresponds with what sociology and tourism scholars refer to as “emparkment”: the “process of manufacturing an ‘ordered natural experience’ within protected areas ...” (Lemelin, 2006, 517). As Lemelin (2006), among others, have noted, “emparkment” can contribute to worrisome trends – “in some instances desensitis[ing] viewers to natural rhythms, and accustom[ing] tourists to temporary exposure to exotic landscapes and wildlife (Crawshaw & Urry, 1997; Desmond, 1999)” (Lemelin, 517).

But the constructedness was also a significant part of the “learning” side of my “Lords of the Arctic” vacation. Our Rover drivers spent time talking about the tourism enterprise they were involved in, about the vehicles and the regulation of their use in the Wildlife Management area.⁵ The drivers’ commentary demonstrated a fair degree of insight into the tensions between conservation and economics, protection and education, the integrity of the local ecosystems and the financial needs of the town. It seemed to me as though the drivers were approaching their time with us as a form of education, and they used the constraints shaping our outings as a launch pad of sorts for “teaching moments,” encouraging us to join them

⁴ A few of my fellow tourists expressed frustration at the delay of the headlining event – the bear watching.

⁵ From this we learned that only a relatively small number of buggies (25?) are licensed for use in the Management Area and only on a limited number of pre-existing trails. Because of the repeat traffic the trails are extremely in some areas, making for a very bumpy ride. We were told that fixing the trails would be too disruptive to the ecosystem, and that trail condition discourages visitors from driving their own vehicles out onto the tundra.

in a more reflexive understanding of what we were doing and how our wildlife tourism fits into a set of local and broader issues.

Furthermore, the extra days before our bear outings gave us time to learn more about the polar bears' place in a larger picture – we learned about different and varying bear populations, about other animals they eat and/or share the north with, about threats to polar bears' survival, their political significance, and the meanings they hold for some indigenous peoples.

The scientist leading our learning sessions seemed to resist offering us pat or simple answers. He was persistent in conveying the issues and questions polar bears are tangled up with as complex issues and questions, and in making it clear how much even the experts still just don't know. That sense of uncertainty was sometimes hard to accept, but it also undermined some of the “last chance to see” rhetoric we were all too familiar with (and to some extent driven by), and in this sense the uncertainty could be reassuring as well.

4. The importance of *seeing*.

Studies indicate that “the ... majority of people who go to protected areas” go “to see wildlife,” and most will leave unsatisfied “if they fail to see the anticipated species (Hoagland & Meeks, 1997)” (Lemelin, 2006, 528). I would say this was true of me and of my fellow travellers. After visiting Churchill I can confidently echo Lemelin's claim (2006) that “Wildlife tourism, in the context of viewing polar bears, is principally about viewing ... and/or photographing [the] bears” (528). The drive to see and photograph is another aspect of “emparkment,” which “creates an environment where experiences are consumed and ‘visitation evidence’ is gathered

through the help of photographs and more recently, digital images” (Lemelin, 2006, 517). For a tourist increasingly accustomed to visually consuming exotic wildlife, “photographic collectables” have the potential to “become addictive,” fuelling “a need to pursue bigger and better trophies providing further evidence of one’s accomplishments” (Lemelin, 2006, 517).

Previous studies of polar bear tourism in Churchill found that more than 60% of visitors owned “photographic equipment” and just under 60% owned “binoculars or spotting scopes” (Lemelin, 2006, 522). Similarly, I was in the majority when I arrived in Churchill equipped with a camera and binoculars; in fact, in our group camera ownership may have been closer to 75 or 80%, not including cell phone cameras. Just as *seeing* polar bears was our shared motivation for heading out on this excursion, I am sure we all shared a desire to leave with a *visual record* of at least some of what we saw.

Tourism scholars have argued that anything else would seem almost “unnatural” “in today’s visual society (Russell & Ankemanm, 1996; Urry, 2002 in Lemelin, 2006, 526). In such a context, “photography becomes less of an illustration of one’s level of artistic tendency, and more of an act of mimicking other photographers or images” (Lemelin, 2006, 526). For my vacation group, the photography most likely to be mimicked, in aspiration if not in execution, was the “NatGeo” (National Geographic) image or video. “NatGeo” represented the ideal we measured our images against. If we, as polar bear tourists, were after a “trophy,” this was it.

We consumed the sight of these polar bears as status symbols as well as objects of aesthetic appreciation (Lemelin, 2006, 526-7). We were also compiling visual records of our experiences, to share with friends and family, to allow us to relive at least some part of our wonder later, and to weave these moments into our individual stories (see 526-7). And we bonded over this common effort (cf. Lemelin et al., 2008).

5. Lunch with a polar bear: something more.

Despite our shared focus on capturing a visual record, members of our group would on occasion remark on the importance of experiencing our polar bear encounters rather than limiting our vision to the viewfinder or the camera's LCD screen.

Lemelin's earlier research (2006) on wildlife tourism in Churchill reported similar sentiments, where tourists found "avid or excessive photography" to be a "distraction to wildlife viewing" (530). Aware of this potential for distraction, some of my fellow vacationers and I would sometimes make a deliberate effort to set down our cameras and take the time to simply look and take in the experience.

For me, the best chance to move beyond "ocular consumption" came when our Polar Rover stopped 'roving' and we paused to simply watch and to break for lunch.⁶ The bears we had initially spotted remained near our vehicle throughout this quiet pause. And though they moved about a bit, and once on each outing two bears sparred, they often did very little and moved even less, giving us a chance to develop

⁶ "Ocular consumption" as it applies to wildlife tourism has been described as a practice focused on "purchasing experiences" – experiences that "include [the chance to gaze at] natural spaces and wild animals" (see Curtin, 2005, in Lemelin, 2006, 530).

our 'glances' (see Lemelin, 2006) into a more sustained form of attention (cf. Marvin).

During Lemelin's earlier studies of polar bear tourism, researchers found that "increasing 'temporal investments' ... by wildlife tourists" can lead to an intensified sense of closeness and encourage visitors to not just look but to listen, and to smell... (Lemelin, 2006, 528). It is extended moments such as this, when the feeling of "spatial displacement" from the animals can start to diminish, "where the gaze is permitted to evolve and [watchers are able to] incorporate [their] other senses," that facilitate "a sense of 'belonging' or rejuvenation" (see 528).

And this brings me back to my lunch with a polar bear. While I sat inside the Rover, eating my sandwich, apple and cookie, the bear I was gazing at through the window lay on the tundra outside, snacking on the long grass around it.⁷ I lunched, the bear snacked. I felt the cold breeze on my face as I had left the window open; I could see the breeze ruffle the bear's fur. And I felt like we were dining together, in the only way that we could.

6. Provisional conclusion: entangled interspecies relations.

In an introduction to a set of essays about watching animals, Garry Marvin reminds readers that a "direct" "visual encounter" with an "empirical animal" doesn't constitute "anything approaching a pure or unmediated viewing of animals. All such viewing is shaped by social and cultural factors, and an animal before us never can be simply a neutral presence" (Marvin, 2005, 7).

⁷ (Polar bears are carnivores, but our scientist told us that they sometimes eat the local flora for some extra nutrients.)

This is certainly true of polar bears, whose social and cultural meanings are shaped by debates over climate change and conservation, the economic value of local tourism, and the fraught relations between indigenous communities and governmental organizations, among other issues.⁸

Sitting in a Polar Rover in the Churchill Wildlife Management Area, I gazed at one specific wild polar bear enjoying a snack. But I also gazed on a bear whose physical condition was somehow a marker of the health of the global polar bear population. As I sat and watched, my gaze also contributed to a feeling of possessiveness, as if this bear before me was *my* polar bear, in contrast to the many bears in photos and videos I had seen before my trip and since. I also reflected on the fact that this was *not* my bear, that this bear was, that all polar bears are, beyond my ownership, my reach and even, to a great extent, my understanding. And these are only a few of the ideas and feelings circulating through and around my mind while I sat and had lunch with a polar bear.

So this polar bear before me, and the others lounging around us, could not be simply polar bears. But I don't want to stop at the recognition that no animal is a "neutral presence" and that there was no way for me to access an unmediated view. As Donna Haraway suggests in *When Species Meet* (2008), mediation may be, not a barrier or a separation, but a kind of entanglement, an infolding (249). And *all* things – including living critters – are "[n]ever purely themselves"; they, we, are "compound" – "made up of combinations of other things coordinated to magnify

⁸ "Wildlife tourism in its natural environment in particular is not a neutral, value free experience; rather, it is interpreted from existing ideological contexts, on-site stimuli, and various off- site stimuli (e.g. social forces, social constructs) (Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Lee, 2001)" (Lemelin, 2006, 523).

power, to make something happen, to engage the world, to risk fleshy acts of interpretation” (250). Humans and polar bears are both compound critters.

And I feel it’s important to remember that my experience with these polar bears was not a unidirectional encounter. The bears were often still, yes – conserving energy while they waited for the Bay ice to form. And, yes, they rarely paid us much attention. But now and then, they did look back, or approach. And even the choice to not walk away from us was a kind of response to our human and technological presence.

These bears around us were not passive objects, placed and waiting to be visually consumed. Inside the tundra buggy we were, in a literal sense, the ones inside a box for the bears to view or not. These polar bears encountered us as we encountered them, as active agents, even if their agency and ours remain entangled in uneven, asymmetrical relations (see Haraway 261-3).

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