

On March 18th 2011, a polar bear sow and her new cub emerged from their snow den on the Spy Island Drillsite, an artificial island constructed a few miles off the Beaufort Sea coast in northern Alaska. When the pregnant mother bear entered her den, probably in October or early November of last year, there had been little or no human activity for several weeks on the small, artificial island. When she and her cub emerged, however, they found themselves on the edge of an active construction site.

ENI Petroleum, the Italian firm that built the offshore island, completed an ice road over the frozen Beaufort Sea from nearby Oliktok Point in February. Equipment, material and workers were moved over the ice road and construction was begun when in March workers were surprised by the bears. Following a response plan previously approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, ENI immediately ceased operations, evacuated personnel, established a one mile no disturbance zone around the bears and contacted the Service.

Within hours, USFWS Region 7 polar bear biologist Christopher Putnam was on site, to monitor the bears' activity and ensure they were not disturbed by human activity. Putnam also set up a remote den camera, which captured the video shown here.

Though the site was deserted when the sow dug her den, Putnam thinks that she may have been aware of some of the activity going on above and around her over the course of the winter. Once the cub was born, however, her biological investment in the den and cub was such that she was unlikely to leave until the young bear was able to survive in the cold and challenging Arctic world outside.

By March 21, just days after the initial sighting, the bears had moved off the island and onto the sea ice to hunt. Polar bear sows with cubs will typically linger around their snow dens with their cubs for a few days to a few weeks. ENI didn't resume construction on the island for two more days, to be certain the bears had departed and weren't going to return. Based on his observations and the video from the den camera Putnam is confident that the bears left the island naturally and not because of any human disturbance. The event serves as an example of the realities of living and working in Arctic Alaska with everyone involved doing everything right for the safety and conservation of both polar bears and people.