



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## 2016 Arctic Refuge Polar Bear Viewing Season Highlights

*Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*



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**Introduction:** This document shares highlights of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's (Refuge) polar bear viewing management program through a brief synopsis of some of our current operations. Annual technical reports of Refuge staff activities detailing challenges and achievements related to polar bears and people have been developed as field reports each year since at least 2004, but this document is the first meant to help the public understand the Refuge's current role specific to polar bear viewing.

Information about other aspects of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Polar Bear program is available at <https://www.fws.gov/alaska/fisheries/mmm/polarbear/pbmain.htm>, while a timeline of the development of polar bear viewing at Kaktovik is available at <http://go.usa.gov/x9FzB>.

In northeast Alaska, polar bear viewing occurs on lands and adjacent waters in the community of Kaktovik. Arctic Refuge has management authority on the waters surrounding Kaktovik but does not have management authority for viewing from non-Refuge lands managed by the community. Because of the interrelated effects of the growing polar bear viewing industry on bears and the community, Refuge staff continues to seek collaboration with local residents to address viewing management holistically.

This document provides highlights of the 2016 polar bear viewing season. Accomplishments, successes, areas of concern, and areas for potential improvement are summarized under the following topic areas:

- I. Kaktovik Youth Ambassadors
- II. Arctic Refuge-Based Polar Bear Viewing
- III. Non-Refuge Based Polar Bear Viewing
- IV. Community Outreach Conducted by Refuge Staff
- V. Visitor Outreach Conducted by Refuge Staff

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## **I. Kaktovik Youth Ambassadors** (Not to be confused with Arctic Youth Ambassadors)

Kaktovik youth teach visitors from around the world about polar bear safety and Inupiat culture prior to their polar bear viewing outings. This program has been in operation since 2012. The Kaktovik Youth Ambassadors (known as KYAs) hit the ground running this year because visitors started arriving by mid-August. Visitors frequently reflect that visits with the KYAs turn out to rival seeing the polar bears as their trip highlight. However, because of increased numbers of visitors and the increased amount of time each visitor spent on Refuge waters with guides, the KYAs' roles changed from previous years. Guides and visitors were less able to accommodate visits between clients and KYAs. Previously, KYAs met with visitors at various locations (Marsh Creek Inn, Waldo Arms, and the Arctic Refuge bunkhouse), when their school schedules would allow. In response to this shift, KYAs decided to change the scope of the program this season, with a focus toward projects enabling them to deliver polar bear

awareness sessions within the community, meet with visitors when schedules allowed, and increase work with their peers in the school. In all, four KYAs provided community service with guidance from local community and local governments, the school, USFWS, Alaska Geographic, and visitors. Here are their accomplishments:

1. Media Project: completed edits of their polar bear and community awareness video. The video is ready for production and distribution pending community mentor consent. The KYAs worked to insure the video properly reflects Inupiat values, community values, and polar bear safety and awareness, not only focused towards visitors but for everyone in Kaktovik during the polar bear viewing season.
2. Community Youth Outreach: collaborated with school and USFWS staff to plan and present polar bear awareness and safety classes to fellow students of all grade levels at the Harold Kaveolook School in Kaktovik. The KYAs presented training to the kindergarten class through the 6<sup>th</sup> grade; impacting 37 elementary aged children.
3. Pledge, Slogan and Key Values: when questions arose about their role (i.e.: should they be junior guides on boats? Are they volunteers for the USFWS?), KYAs created their “mission map” to clarify their role for their community in ensuring visitor and community awareness and safety during the polar bear viewing season. With support from community, school and USFWS mentors, the KYAs brainstormed, developed, and integrated into the media project video the following guiding principles:
  - a. Pledge: We are the Kaktovik Youth Ambassadors. We help take care of our community, polar bears and the visitors who come to see them.
  - b. Slogan: Working together for polar bears and people.
  - c. Key Values: Making peace while teaching and protecting the community, the visitors, and the polar bears.
4. Visitor contacts: the KYAs met face-to-face, one-on-one with 21 visitors from the USA, Australia, New Zealand, France, United Kingdom and Switzerland this viewing season. These meet-ups provided visitors the opportunity to ask questions about life in Kaktovik, and provided KYAs the opportunity to share with visitors their concerns about visitor impacts upon the community, and ways to reduce those impacts through safe and respectful practices.

Program recommendations identified by KYAs and/or mentors:

- Be sure all participate in a pre-season meeting between KYAs, community mentors, school coach, and USFWS staff via Skype or teleconference. Instill awareness of and pride for program's ownership by community in the upcoming season.
- Continue to brainstorm ways to engage Kaktovik leadership so they are more directly mentoring KYAs to improve the program.
- Using the KYA pledge, slogan and key values, youth leaders can integrate these messages into their projects to build awareness.
- As KYAs graduate into adult community leaders and move on from the program, the community might consider how they will continue to recruit emerging youth leaders for the KYA program, to continue to communicate community-based concerns to visitors.
- Youth leaders might consider whether they can commit to maintaining a KYA social media platform, which requires regular posts to stay current. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter might be viable tools for KYAs to show the world the benefits of community/visitor interaction for meeting community needs and the leadership roles KYAs play on behalf of their community.
- Youth leaders might consider the benefits of identifying one KYA to be the group leader for the season. The group leader would coordinate KYA/mentor meetings, lead projects (or delegate to project leaders) and coordinate with local government organizations to insure KYA messages continue to address community concerns.



2016 Kaktovik Youth Ambassadors meeting with visitors at Marsh Creek Inn, Kaktovik, Alaska

## II. Arctic Refuge-based Polar Bear Viewing

With increasing numbers of visitors and operators through 2015, Refuge staff prepared for a 2016 season forecast to be the busiest since the Refuge formalized oversight of polar bear viewing in 2010. During the viewing season, staff continued to help mentor the Kaktovik Youth Ambassadors and increased both public outreach from the Refuge, and familiarity with viewing activities on Refuge waters, to help maintain safety and quality opportunities for viewing. For eight months leading up to the viewing season, significant staff effort went into insuring adequate staffing in spite of an unexpected staff vacancy just months before peak visitor activity. The Refuge extended staffing to cover the period between August 25 and October 14; coordinated with permittees to develop a voluntary 30 yard viewing distance from bears; updated print resources requested by operators to help them prevent disturbance (such as the “Polar Bear Source Book” available at <http://go.usa.gov/x9Fzv> for the public in advance of their visits); and prepared to aggressively increase the Refuge outreach program to include both classroom visits to resident youth, and daily public presentations to visitors.

Guides authorized to provide polar bear viewing services routinely adhered to Refuge special conditions, and Marine Mammal Protection Act and Endangered Species Act regulations. USFWS staff observed no deliberate disturbance to polar bears (such as separation of female polar bears from cubs) or permit violations within Refuge boundaries resulting from viewing activities, though there were some unintentional instances of minor disturbance (“minor disturbance” means the disturbance did not result in a bear’s permanent displacement from location or activity). Guides routinely discussed such unintentional disturbance instances with staff, so as to eliminate future instances of disturbance. As noted above, guides agreed to maintaining a minimum 30 yard viewing distance between polar bears and viewing boats. From what we observed during the 50 day viewing period USFWS personnel were at Kaktovik, boat operators met and exceeded this recommendation. Communications with guides and polar bear viewers generally indicate the 30 yard distance was close enough for spectacular viewing opportunities on Refuge waters. Many visitors actually stated that a great viewing and/or photography experience could be accomplished from 100 yards and that they believed 30 yards was rather too close. A lesser number of semi-professional and professional photographers suggested preference for a shorter than 30 yard viewing distance buffer because it would allow them the opportunity for capturing extreme close-up images of the bears. Staff observed that boat operators made a priority effort to observe the voluntary 30 yard viewing distance buffer from bears, and appreciate continuing cooperative efforts to identify a strategy for managing a sustainable viewing opportunity.

Refuge staff appreciates the collegial atmosphere guides work to maintain, and recognizes that meeting the need to prevent disturbance during recreational polar bear viewing can occur only in cooperation. Refuge staff hopes to address with guides the following activities that were directly observed or reported in 2016 that fell short of USFWS expectations for continued safe and high-quality polar bear viewing:

1. In rare instances, reports were made of visitors viewing from boats attempting to get the attention of resting polar bears by shouting and/or waving arms. This direct violation of polar bear protection laws and Refuge special use permit conditions has the potential to

threaten the continuation of opportunities for commercial recreational polar bear viewing, because polar bear viewing can be authorized only if the natural behavior of the bears is not changed by the activity.

2. In rare instances, guides operated with more than 10 people per business at one time or with more than six passengers on board a vessel at one time. These actions violate special use permit conditions and may have been a result of operators unintentionally overbooking clients or operators trying to accommodate clients whose stays were not planned properly for the unforeseen weather limitations characteristic of the area.
3. Guides occasionally operated vessels, or employed staff, not documented in their permit authorizations. Guides are expected to insure Refuge permit files are updated in advance of operational changes as needed throughout the season so USFWS staff can adequately monitor activity on Refuge waters.
4. Some operators violated their special use permit requirement to make contact with the permit manager prior to operation (or attend regularly-scheduled teleconferences that might serve instead of this requirement). This required communication is essential because it allows the manager a way to insure operators are aware of safety and management concerns that may have developed since the permit was authorized. It is possible that requiring mandatory meetings with staff in Kaktovik in order for operators to begin activity may need to be written into their special use permit conditions to reinforce the importance of insuring this essential communication occurs.
5. In rare instances, guides moved vessels on the water at high speeds. It should be noted that no speed limits exist, and motoring at speeds that create a wake may be a common practice for local residents conducting routine transportation. However, faster speeds can increase the possibility of colliding with swimming bear(s), and operating faster than “no-wake” motoring speeds is inconsistent with marine wildlife watching best practices. Operating at speeds that create a wake may also be considered inconsistent with quality opportunities for polar bear viewing when practiced by commercial operators transporting clients for the purpose of recreational wildlife watching in a natural setting.
6. Visitors again expressed in 2016 their concern that their opportunity for taking photographs of bears in a natural setting was impacted by other boats in the area. Staff recognizes the need for a long-term strategy to insure quality viewing opportunities are maintained. See <http://go.usa.gov/x9FuC> for information about future planning and management of polar bear viewing.



2016 guides conducting viewing operations on Refuge waters surrounding Kaktovik

Strategies for improvement:

1. Communication with public: Refuge staff will continue to seek input from the wide range of publics (local residents, visitors, guides, Native Corporation representatives, Tribal representatives, whaling captains and crews, Air Force representatives, commercial airline pilots and day-excursion tour pilots, law enforcement staff, fire department staff, polar bear patrollers, etc.) knowledgeable of the viewing setting and its challenges. Effective management of polar bear viewing requires “all hands on deck”—operating with a spirit of trust and respect—yet addressing management directly may not be a community priority. In coming months, Refuge staff will be clear about what aspects of polar bear viewing management they will act upon because those aspects are directly tied to Refuge responsibilities. Refuge staff will also be clear about those aspects of polar bear viewing management that are not within Refuge authority because they occur on non-Refuge lands, but for which Refuge staff remain open to community collaboration.
2. Communication with guides: regularly-scheduled teleconferences leading up to the next viewing season were attended by most guides in 2016 and will be continued in 2017. Attending guides additionally requested a Kaktovik-based season kick-off meeting between USFWS staff and guides early in the 2016 viewing season—but guides did not attend, even after repeated meeting attempts by staff, because guides were overwhelmed with the demands of their operations earlier than they expected in 2016. Guides could be mandated to report to Refuge visitor services staff by phone, email, texts or in person (preferred) in advance of operating with clients and/or upon arriving in Kaktovik, to reinforce the importance of regular communications. Refuge staff will continue to provide guides

with opportunities to meet regularly in informal settings so the Refuge can understand what it is their staff can assist with, and to build on the essential relationship between guides and managers formed from trust and mutual respect.

### **III. Non-Refuge Based Polar Bear Viewing**

Land viewing is outside the Refuge's management authority. Because messaging about appropriate boat-based viewing is so readily available, the absence of guidance about land viewing can be confusing to visitors and residents alike. As local leaders address land viewing, the following actions might influence visitors to meet community needs:

- Community discussions to establish norms for local resident behaviors while viewing at the bone pile and for captains managing butchering sites might be a first step to clarify expectations for visitor behaviors. Sometimes practices by local residents are inconsistent with what gets informally recommended to visitors, and visitors are sometimes informally recommended contradicting guidance. It is unclear whether and how local practices could or should differ from practices by visitors viewing on land.
- Visitors could be provided clear, consistent messages about when, where and how they may be allowed to view polar bears on land in Kaktovik and during subsistence whaling activities.
- Messages could be translated into the languages of visitors who do not understand English so language barriers do not prevent desired behaviors by visitors seeking to obey community guidance.
- Visitors have expressed the benefit of a community-determined pool of guides who are committed to upholding community-determined standards for land-viewing practices by visitors. Many visitors who are seeking to obey community guidance and who seek land guides do not know who to contact for services and want to use the services of guides committed to community-determined standards.

#### IV. Community Outreach

A realignment of staff duties resulted in a dramatic increase in USFWS-based outreach to both visitors and residents in the village of Kaktovik throughout 2016. Arctic Refuge and Marine Mammal Management staff visited the school 20 times during the polar bear viewing season and taught 37 children about Alaska wildlife and arctic vegetation.

Staff also attended public meetings to convey the purpose of the staffing effort and to be available for discussing questions and concerns related to polar bear viewing.



**KYA and USFWS polar bear, wildlife and arctic vegetation outreach classes at Harold Kaveolook School in Kaktovik**

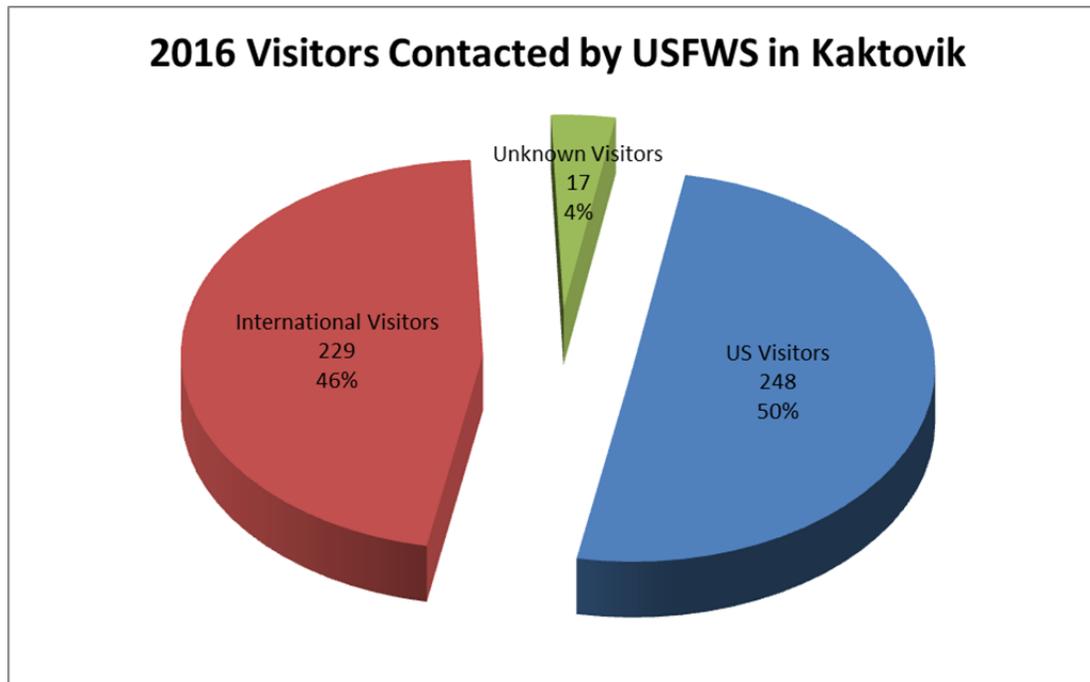
## V. Visitor Outreach

In 2016, USFWS staff provided focused outreach about polar bears to visitors—including discussions about biological polar bear information, and interpretive messaging about polar bears in the Southern Beaufort Sea—all within a general overview of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and its role in managing commercial polar bear viewing on Refuge waters; and cooperating with the community to manage polar bear viewing on lands in Kaktovik. During the 2016 season, staff was available to make personal contact with 494 American and international visitors. Because of this effort, more visitors were personally contacted during the 2016 viewing season than ever before.

The diversity of origins of visitors has implications for the challenges to address outreach needs. Visitors personally contacted by staff usually offered information about their country/state of origin. The pie chart below shows that a little more than half (248) of the visitors contacted directly by staff were from the United States; and a little less than half (229) were international visitors.

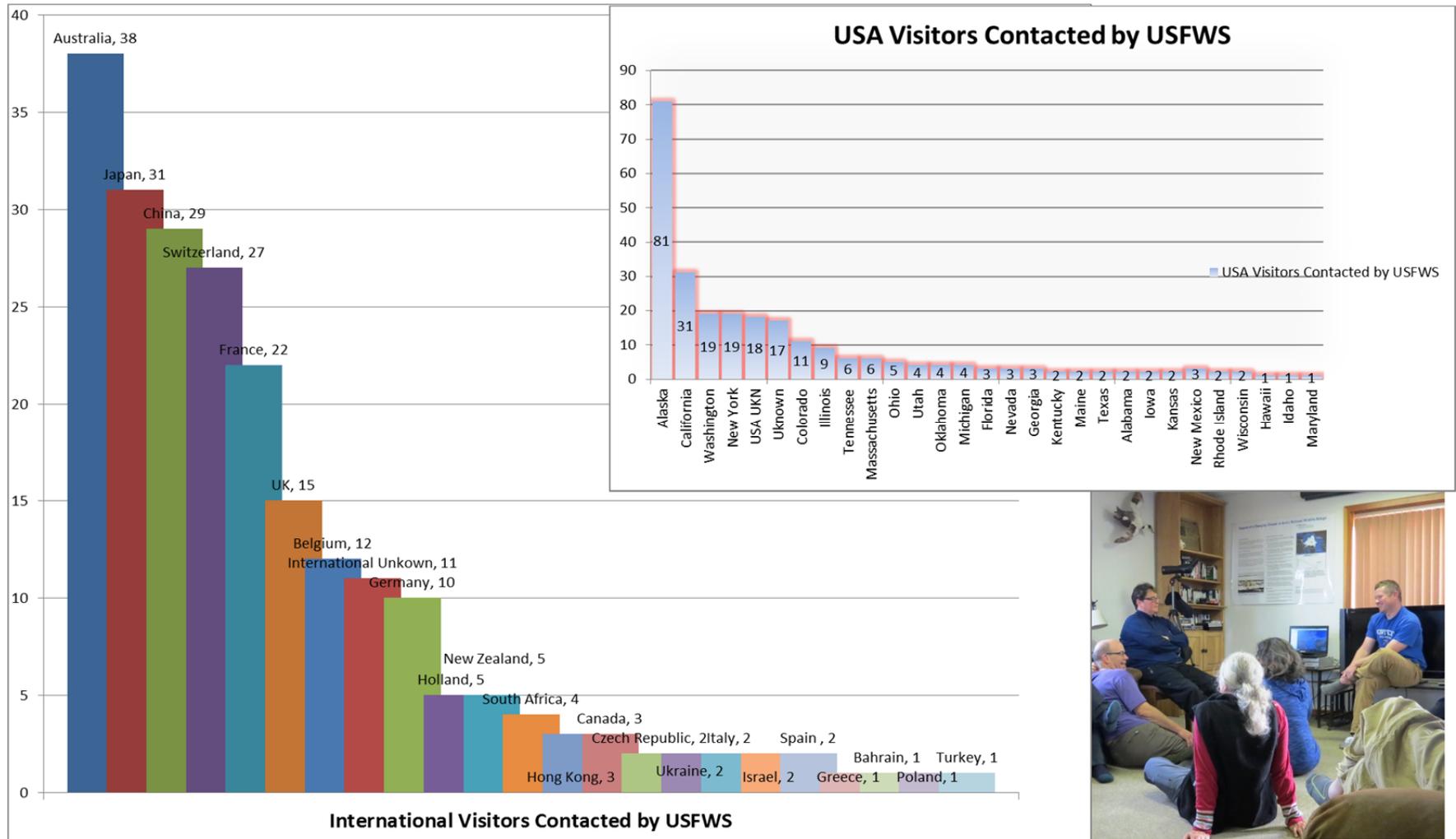
**2016 Polar Bear Season Visitor Breakdown**

US Visitors	248	50.20%
International Visitors	229	46.36%
Unknown Visitors	17	3.44%
	<b>494</b>	<b>100.00%</b>



The bar graphs below show that visitors contacted by staff in 2016 represented 23 countries, and 29 of the 50 states.

Visitors come to Kaktovik from all over the world. This provides unique and diverse opportunities for reaching the public with polar bear information. Areas for potential improvement relating to outreach opportunities include recognizing that staff interactions with most visitors are occurring during visitor meal times at March Creek Inn/Waldo Arms, so expanded options for facility use and visitor meeting times are needed in order to increase outreach interactions. Outreach, which dramatically expanded in 2016, was dependent on a level of staffing that exceeds current budgets. It is likely this level of outreach will not be sustained into coming years without increases in operating resources.





# A Season in Review





U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



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