



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Kaktovik Youth Ambassadors

Alaska Native Youth take leadership role in polar bear management and conservation

Connecting visitors with community concerns

Each fall since 2012, high school students from Kaktovik, Alaska have played a major role in polar bear conservation and visitor management within Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Kaktovik is a remote village along the coast of the Beaufort Sea within the Arctic Ocean, and is not accessible by road. Most residents lead a subsistence-based lifestyle, depending largely on the resources of surrounding lands and waters to feed their families.

The youth are accustomed to seeing polar bears wandering outside their homes. However, polar bears and residents haven't always been living so close. While youth grew up with polar bears as neighbors, the older generations in Kaktovik remember bears staying farther out on the sea ice, and only occasionally coming to shore. Polar bears have increasingly been coming to shore all along the Beaufort Sea Coast due to factors including retreating sea ice.

But why have polar bears been congregating around Kaktovik? Late fall sea ice forms earlier around Kaktovik than other areas of the coast; seals can be found in higher density near Kaktovik, and remains from subsistence harvest consistently draw polar bears to the area.



USFWS

Kaktovik Youth Ambassador Chelsea Brower in her village, Kaktovik, AK, a remote northern coastal community located within Arctic Refuge.

Increasing numbers of bears around Kaktovik, coupled with increasing international awareness of the plight of the Beaufort Sea polar bears, has rapidly expanded the local polar bear tourism industry. People come from around the world to view the magnificent bears in the wild.

Since viewing polar bears in the wild is an inherently dangerous activity, and resources in remote areas like Kaktovik are limited, there are increasing concerns about public safety, community well-being, and welfare of the polar bears.



Kaktovik residents share habitat with polar bears along the coast of the Arctic Ocean.

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In an early attempt to help resolve these concerns, a Tribal grant from the USFWS helped fund initial community-driven polar bear management efforts, including establishing the Kaktovik Youth Ambassador (KYA) program.



Kaktovik Youth Ambassadors share the visitor data they have collected with Jennifer Reed, USFWS Arctic Refuge Visitor Services Coordinator.

“The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.”

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What do the KYAs do?

After each school day and over the weekend, these teens walk to the two hotels and greet polar bear viewing visitors. During the past three seasons, the youth reported meeting with over 500 international visitors. The youth give briefings, ensuring that visitors are respectful of their community life and of bears by explaining acceptable and safe behavior in bear country. The KYAs

advise all visitors to obtain a local guide when they go out bear viewing.

The program has given these youth leaders firsthand experience addressing complex issues in community-based conservation. One KYA reports that “polar bear viewing is growing - it allows outsiders to gain awareness of our culture and lifestyle.” There are also downsides to the tourism industry, such as visitors competing with locals for resources, for example for flights in and out of Kaktovik. The KYAs contribute suggestions for improvement to visitor services, such as their suggestion to expand resources available in certain foreign languages.

Chelsea Brower, a KYA going into the fourth year of the program, says the experience has helped her come out of her shell. “I think it is important for youth my age to be involved so they know how to bring their voice forward, so people know that young people care about issues like polar bear well-being and community control over the tourism industry,” Brower says. Brower and the other KYAs have become role models to those around them, inspiring friends to educate themselves on local conservation issues and to take on leadership roles in the Arctic.



Youth receive awards from U.S. Fish & Wildlife Services in Spring 2015 for their inspiring leadership. From left to right: Nora Jane Burns receiving award on behalf of daughter Kimberley, Tori Inglangasak, Chelsea Brower, Melanie Tikluk and Jonas MacKenzie.