



Arctic National Wildlife Refuge *Proposed Improved Polar Bear Viewing Program Overview*

Planning Update 3 / June 2019

Message from the Refuge Manager



In this update, we're letting you know the progress that has been made to develop a long term plan for managing polar bear viewing activities on Refuge waters around the community of Kaktovik. We'd like the Polar Bear Viewing Management Strategy to accomplish the following goals:

- **Prevent disturbance to bears from viewing activities, and help to minimize human-bear conflicts wherever they occur, consistent with national polar bear protection laws**
- **Offer visitors high-quality viewing experiences that match the community's character and natural environment**
- **Minimize social impacts to the community**
- **Produce local economic benefits**
- **Support mutually beneficial cultural exchanges between visitors and the community**

Steve Berendzen
Refuge Manager

The coastal lands around the community of Kaktovik are a resting area for polar bears each fall. As ice diminishes throughout the Arctic, the bears are spending more time on land while they wait for the sea ice to form. As a consequence, Kaktovik, located within the boundaries of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, has become a destination for visitors who want to view polar bears in their natural setting.

In recent years, the number of such visitors has increased significantly. A priority within National Wildlife Refuges is to provide the public with opportunities to view wildlife, as long as this causes no negative impacts to wildlife or the communities that host viewers, and does not degrade the quality of experiences available to visitors. Additionally, both the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act require there be no disturbance to the bears.

Our efforts to understand local concerns and desires about polar bear viewing began back around 2010, through face-to-face discussions with local residents, as well as several workshops and meetings. More recently, Refuge staff focused on obtaining information about, and feedback from, the viewing public. From 2017, Refuge staff have been collecting data about visitor numbers and activities, and the type of polar bear viewing opportunities available in the Kaktovik area; determining what motivates visitors to come view the bears; and identifying issues of concern.

Since October 2018, Refuge staff used a number of means (meetings, workshops, documents, etc.) to gather ideas and information from local officials, whaling captains, guides and other service providers, community members, visitors, and biologists, as well as from social science and transportation data.

Staff visits to the community for Tribal consultations, interviews, and community meetings resulted in extensive input from a broad range of interests that helped focus the issues of concern. Those issues include the scale and balance of tourism, space on planes, impacts on bears, conflicts with subsistence activities, privacy in the village, economic benefits to the community, human safety concerns in the village, variable number of bears in the area, ensuring high-quality viewing experiences, limited Refuge staff and other resources, and the need to expand a comprehensive education program that improves outreach to visitors.

We've found that a lot of what the Refuge has been doing is successful, and we are hopeful that with specific improvements in management, issues that are within the Refuge's control or influence can be addressed.

In spring and summer 2019, with ongoing input, we will continue developing this strategy for improving polar bear viewing, that meets the goals listed on the left, and addresses issues so that improvements can be implemented in 2020.

If you or someone you know has questions or would like to share additional input, please contact Jennifer Reed at 907-455-1835, or jennifer_reed@fws.gov.

Timeline



What are the biggest proposed changes?

The proposed new Polar Bear Viewing Management Strategy includes two significant changes: Instead of temporarily controlling the number of visitors through a freeze on new boat guides, we propose lifting the temporary freeze on new permits and instead establishing and requiring the use of a web-based reservation system.

For more details about how we're proposing to improve current management efforts, read the "Proposed methods to address issues" section on pages 6 and 7.



All photos USFWS



Managing Polar Bear Viewing for Success

Ten years of successful work

Over the past 10 years, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) staff, Kaktovik leaders and residents, and other community partners have worked together to address issues and concerns related to polar bears. These successful efforts have been effective in maintaining a safe and healthy situation, and include:

- a boat-guiding permit system that ensures capable captains, safe watercraft, and protection of polar bears;
- the youth leadership program (Kaktovik Youth Ambassadors) to educate visitors about polar bears and the community;
- Refuge outreach to visitors through kiosk posters, printed Kaktovik community visitor guideline cards, and direct contact, etc.

As the number of visitors attracted to Kaktovik to see polar bears continues to increase, however, USFWS, the community, and other partners recognize it is time to take new and stronger steps to address local desires and issues of concern (see page 4).

Arctic Refuge has authority and control only over what happens on Refuge property. That means, for polar bear viewing, that the Refuge only has management control over the waters of the lagoons around Kaktovik, not on the lands of Kaktovik itself.

To do our part toward addressing issues of concern, the Refuge is working closely with the community to formulate and put in place an improved Polar Bear Viewing Program (the *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Recreational Polar Bear Viewing Program Management Strategy*) that

offers ways to address and correct as many issues as we have control or influence over.

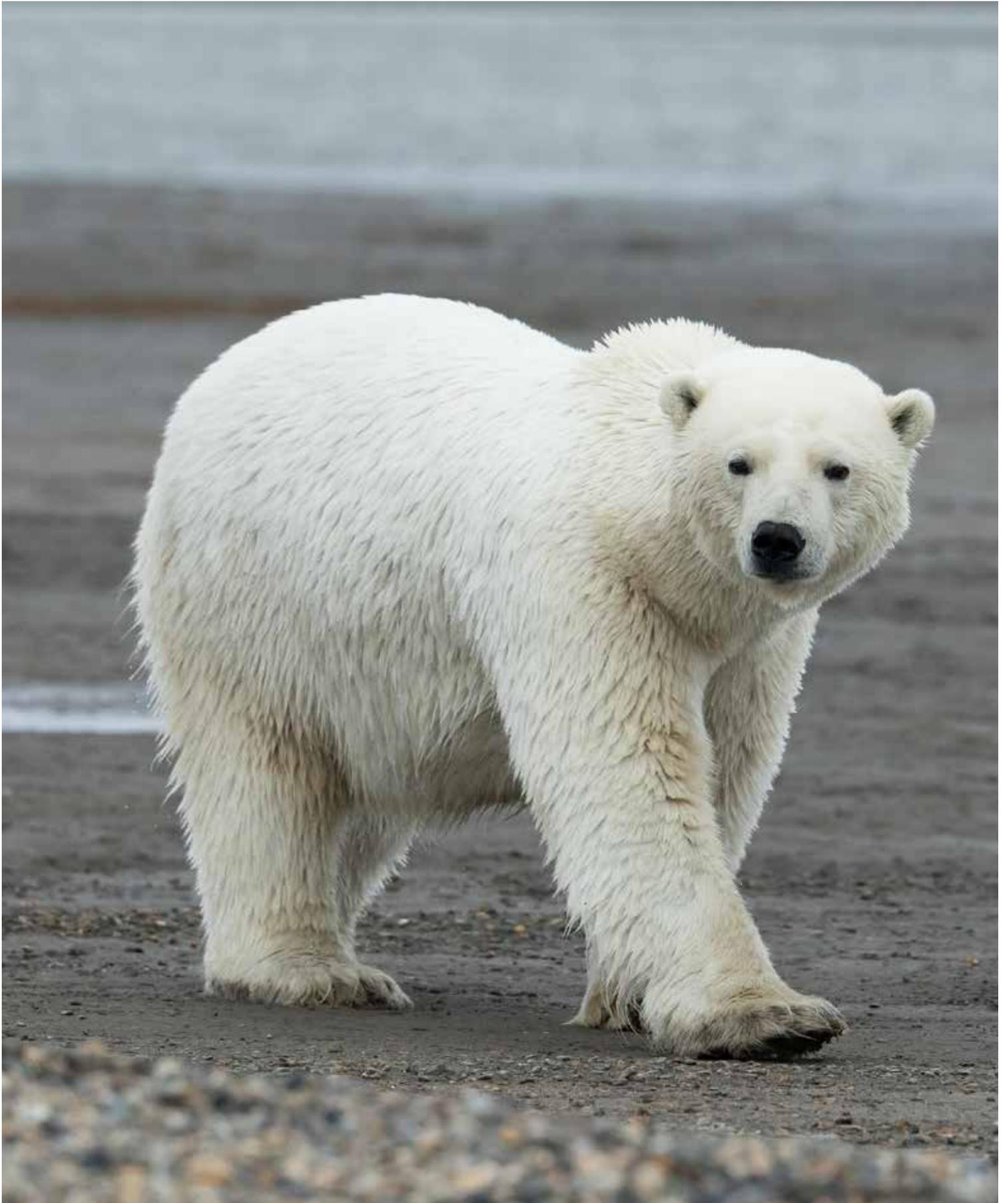
We have heard from you

Through many meetings and interviews to gather ideas and information from local officials, whaling captains, guides and other service providers, community members, visitors, biologists, and visitor management experts, 10 distinct issue categories have been identified. These issues are listed and described briefly in the table on page 4.



Issues of Concern, and Methods to Address Them

Issues	Proposed methods to address issues See pages 6-7 for details.				
	<i>Capable Captains and Safe Watercraft</i>	<i>Education for Visitors, Guides, and Captains</i>	<i>Keep Scale of Tourism Near Current Levels</i>	<i>Change Actions As Needed</i>	<i>Community-led Partnerships</i>
<p>Scale and balance of tourism: The majority of feedback shows there is near-consensus that polar bear viewing tourism should not grow beyond recent-year use, and the scale of Kaktovik tourism should not grow out of balance with existing overnight lodging and commercial air seat availability.</p>			✓	✓	✓
<p>Space on planes: There are complaints of few plane seats available for residents August to early October, causing expensive “strandings” of residents in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Barrow or Deadhorse while waiting for available seats.</p>			✓	✓	✓
<p>Impacts on bears: Concerns are expressed over whether boats are getting too close or surrounding bears, what practice standards guarantee compliance with requirements for no disturbance, and what practice standards show general respect for bears.</p>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p>Conflicts with subsistence activities: A few mention viewing boats sometimes interfere with set netting, may block passage by other boaters at end of spit near bone pile, or could impact the occasional beluga herding opportunity.</p>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p>Privacy in the village: Concerns arise when people take photos without permission at whale harvests, in the village, or at cemeteries; when visitors walk through the village “gawking” and don’t seem to show respect for village life; about where the photos and messages go; and about the effect of social media on the spread of these images and messages.</p>		✓		✓	✓
<p>Economic benefits to the community: There is frustration that more profits do not come to the village; that day-users don’t pay any tourism fees (a lodging tax on overnight visitation now makes the municipal government some money); that the authorized viewing boats are operated by a limited number of people; that the Refuge’s temporary permit freeze has prevented new entries since 2016; and there are desires for a local preference for the permits.</p>	✓		✓	✓	✓
<p>Human safety concerns in the village: Some worry that boats and bears in close proximity may desensitize bears to humans and lead to bold behaviors in the village; that visitors walk around without guides or disregard local safety guidance; and, whether visitors are being reckless or just naïve, that their poor practices could harm bears and tax the community.</p>		✓		✓	✓
<p>Variable number of bears in the area: People wonder how the community will manage visitors in years with low bear numbers; and how will managers respond when the bone pile’s location and presence is uncertain, and may affect bear use patterns/numbers.</p>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p>Ensuring high quality viewing experiences: Although the Refuge must design a program that insures sustainable quality into the future, resident priorities are that their culture be respected and for local economic benefits. Visitors feel that not disturbing the bears, and not impacting the community are both markers of quality. If visitor experience quality is low, and/or if the community does not respond to visitor interest in cultural exchanges to understand village life, visitors could stop coming or pay less.</p>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p>Lack of resources to manage effectively: Refuge needs community input to develop a comprehensive polar bear and village culture education program with components for visitors as well as adult and youth residents; expertise to collect and analyze social science research; and staff to monitor operator compliance, to enforce non-compliance, and to conduct research on the effects on polar bears from visitor viewing activities. The community lacks a mechanism for managing tourism.</p>		✓	✓	✓	✓



We are limited in what we can do, but our actions can have a significant positive impact.

Because the Refuge only has authority to control the boat-based viewing program, we are limited to only being able to make modifications to that program. Therefore, we can directly provide solutions to the identified issues of concern only through management actions effecting the boat-based viewing program. With the community's leadership, though, we could also partner to support resolution of issues from other directions.

Even though we at Arctic Refuge only have authority over boat-based viewing, our actions can make a significant positive impact. Many of the identified issues (see page 4) have to do with concerns about the number of visitors to Kaktovik. How the Refuge manages boat-based viewing will have a direct influence on the number of visitors

coming to the community because scientists recognize boat-based viewing is the primary activity luring visitors to the area. This is why we've listened so hard to all perspectives, to be sure our intent matches the needs of the community. Another advantage of offering on-water viewing is that these opportunities help reduce the potential for human-bear conflicts on land.

Proposed ways to address issues

The proposed Management Strategy provides five distinct ways for the Refuge to address the identified issues. The three direct ways are:

- 1) Continue and strengthen requirements to ensure **capable captains and safe watercraft**.
 - a. Meet Coast Guard "six pack" regulation
 - b. Use only four-stroke outboards or other low-pollution propulsion
 - c. Document experience navigating in local conditions and around polar bears
- 2) Add **education requirements for visitors, guides and boat captains**.
 - a. Certification program for boat captains
 - b. Certification program for tour guides
 - c. Registration program for independent tourists
- 3) Establish and require the use of a web-based reservation system to **keep the scale of tourism near current use levels**.
 - a. Reservation system called the "Common Calendar"
 - b. The calendar would be the way



- to manage the number of visitors
- c. All trip reservations would be entered into this shared calendar
 - d. The calendar would help spread out use over the season

The three actions listed above are immediate ways the Refuge can improve the situation for 2020. After 2020 the Refuge would:

- 4) **Change actions as needed** based on monitoring, and research, or changing conditions.
 - a. Staff monitors permittees on water to ensure they follow rules
 - b. Staff monitors visitor satisfaction to ensure high-quality experiences
 - c. Staff does research to study effects upon viewed bears

Continuing into the future, the Refuge would modify our management to meet the program goals (see goals listed on page 1 sidebar).

These 4 ways to address issues are within the Refuge's control. An additional way to respond to community concerns is for the Refuge staff to support partnerships that are initiated by and led by the community:

- 5) Participate in **community-led partnerships** that make a positive impact on identified issues of concern.
 - a. Community-led partnerships are initiated by the community and supported by Refuge staff
 - b. A possible cooperative project the Refuge could participate in is a community museum and cultural center

Summary

Increasing numbers of polar bear viewing visitors are causing issues within the community of Kaktovik. Your ideas and information have helped confirm that it's time to take new and stronger steps to address local desires and issues. Arctic Refuge can only control water-based viewing activities, so is proposing to remove the temporary freeze on new permits and instead create a reservation system to help resolve as many issues as possible. These, and the other proposed changes to the program, would be implemented for the fall 2020 polar bear viewing season.





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What's next?

We'll continue to work with you to make sure we're on the right track. We intend to finalize our management actions later this summer.

If you or someone you know has questions or would like to share additional input, please contact Jennifer Reed at 907-455-1835, or jennifer_reed@fws.gov.