



Planning and Managing Polar Bear Viewing for the Future

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Planning Update / October 2018

Message from the Refuge Manager



Thank you for your interest in Arctic Refuge. In this update, we're letting you know of the progress that has been made on our efforts to develop a long term plan for managing polar bear viewing activities taking place on Refuge waters around the community of Kaktovik.

Here at Arctic Refuge, our responsibility is to allow wildlife viewing while minimizing harmful impacts to the animals and to local residents. We do this by managing boat-based viewing in ways that take into account the needs of polar bears, and the concerns of the community, guides and visitors.

This coming winter we'll be developing management options based on residents' input and visitor data, and we'll be looking at what's worked in other comparable situations.

We're in the early stages of a multi-year planning effort. The timeline on the right identifies milestones throughout this process.

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—arriving earlier and departing later—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. Although one of the priorities within National Wildlife Refuges is to provide the public with opportunities to view wildlife, viewing activities on a Refuge should cause no negative impacts to wildlife nor to the communities that host viewers. Additionally, both the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act require there be no disturbance to the bears.

The Refuge is moving forward to develop a long term Polar Bear Viewing Management Plan. We'd like the Plan to accomplish the following goals:

- manage boat-based viewing in a manner that reflects resident concerns;
- prevent disturbance to bears;
- offer visitors a high-quality viewing experience that matches the community's character and the natural environment;
- produce local economic benefits;
- support opportunities for mutually beneficial cultural exchanges between visitors and the community.

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, about whom we knew very little. During 2017 and 2018, we collected data about visitor numbers and activities, noted what type of polar bear viewing opportunities are currently available in the Kaktovik area, and determined what motivates visitors to come view the bears.

In 2019 we will again be listening to ideas from Kaktovik community members, including local officials, whaling captains, guides and other service providers; and we will be evaluating similar management actions that have worked in other locations.

For further information, please contact Refuge Manager Steve Berendzen at steve_berendzen@fws.gov.

Timeline



Polar bear viewing (USFWS)

