Kaktovik Guidelines for Community Visitors

- Please be conscientious when visiting our community. We welcome safe and respectful viewing of polar bears and whaling activities.

- Take photos from a distance. Obey barriers set to ensure safe viewing.

- To continue the community’s traditional food-gathering activities, federal law permits community members to hunt bowhead whales. Please respect these traditional activities by staying out of the way during butchering.

- When you view polar bears, use a trained guide. This will ensure safe conduct that obeys federal polar bear protection laws.

- It’s OK to purchase handcrafted items made from marine mammals. The Marine Mammal Protection Act allows only Native Alaskans to sell handcrafted items made of marine mammal parts. Except for these handcrafted items, it is illegal for non-Natives to possess, transport, or sell marine mammal products. Check to ensure that import of marine mammal parts into your country is legal.

Respect our community. Your proper conduct will ensure that polar bear and whale viewing opportunities can continue in the future. Thank you for your efforts!
Polar bears have an important place in the cultural traditions of Alaska Natives, who recognize the bears’ amazing strength, hunting ability and stealth.

Residents and visitors have a unique opportunity to see polar bears in Kaktovik. These bears are part of the Southern Beaufort Sea population, estimated at 1,500 animals. This population uses an area extending more than 800 miles along the north coast of Alaska and Canada. Polar bears prefer to be on ice but as it diminishes each summer and fall the bears come to the coast surrounding Kaktovik to rest, feed, wait for the ice to re-form, and sometimes to den and give birth.

At Barter Island, polar bears on land may encounter brown bears. Polar bears are much larger than brown bears. Adult male polar bears typically measure 8 to 9 feet from nose to tail and can weigh up to 1,320 pounds, adult female polar bears are typically about half the size of males. Despite their larger size, polar bears are often displaced by brown bears when feeding at the bone pile.

Polar bears are specially adapted to the Arctic environment. Bears have white coloration for camouflage; water repellent guard hairs and dense underfur; black skin for absorbing warmth; small “suction cups” on the soles of their feet for traction on slippery ice; teeth specialized for a meat-eating rather than a meat-and-plant diet; and the ability to store large amounts of fat when food is available and then use it later when food is scarce. Polar bears primarily eat ringed seals but they also hunt bearded seals, walrus, and beluga whales, and will scavenge beached carcasses they find along the coast.

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