



# Arctic

## *National Wildlife Refuge*

### Best Practices for Polar Bear Viewing

#### Hire an authorized business when viewing polar bears from the water.

If you view polar bears from the water or use a water taxi service, hire an authorized business with registered boat operators. They have participated in polar bear guide workshops and have the safety training—and knowledge of conservation laws and scientific studies—to provide professional, quality polar bear viewing opportunities. These guides are required to operate and maintain their boats and equipment to professional standards.

Arctic Refuge lists authorized businesses at [www.fws.gov/refuge/arctic/pbguide.html](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/arctic/pbguide.html).

Legal boat operators keep a copy of their Arctic Refuge business permit on their boat. The permit also lists the name of the business's Coast Guard-licensed boat operator(s). If you request, legal boat operators will show you documentation that their business is authorized. They have worked hard to maintain this authorization.

#### How is Arctic Refuge involved?

The Refuge is required to oversee commercial activities on the water and Refuge lands surrounding Kaktovik to protect wildlife habitat and subsistence opportunities for local residents.

Arctic Refuge and its partners provide technical assistance and training opportunities for businesses and boat operators. To find out more, please contact Jennifer Reed at Arctic Refuge: **907-455-1835**, or [jennifer\\_reed@fws.gov](mailto:jennifer_reed@fws.gov).

**Though polar bears may appear tame, these animals are wild and their behavior can change quickly. Viewing polar bears has associated risks.**

**By law, polar bear viewing is dependent on avoiding disturbance to bears. You have an opportunity to view polar bears because people before you used responsible viewing practices. Polar bear viewing will only continue if you and other viewers are careful to keep polar bears and people safe. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommends viewers be accompanied by a knowledgeable guide, using either a boat or a vehicle as a viewing platform.**

**Each polar bear's tolerance to you depends on the bear itself, your location and your actions. Your responsibilities include following the guidelines below to ensure your viewing activities do not change a polar bear's natural behavior.**

Before you view:

- Review the Polar Bear Source Book ([www.fws.gov/refuge/arctic/polarbearv.html](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/arctic/polarbearv.html)).
- Have a safety plan so you know what to do if an emergency arises (for example a vehicle breakdown).
- Be familiar with bear behaviors, and know appropriate responses if a bear approaches you in a curious, nervous, threatening, or aggressive manner.

When you view:

- Proceed slowly. Arrive and leave your viewing area using the same route, with minimal lights and noise. Immediately stop your approach if a bear responds to your presence.
- Remain in your vehicle or boat.
- Prevent your actions from affecting bears. Your actions should not cause a bear to stop what it is doing, move from its initial location, or become focused on you. A bear shows advanced signs of stress when it huffs or snaps its jaws, or presses its ears back.
- Always stay within earshot of all members of your group.
- Avoid noisy conversations and sudden movements.
- Use extra caution if viewing during low light conditions. For example, have a dedicated observer watching for bears that may approach from any direction.

Make sure you:

- Do not herd, follow, chase, or displace bears.
- Do not attract bears with food, scents, sounds, etc.
- Do not allow physical contact between a bear and a vehicle or boat .
- Never separate a mother from her cubs.
- Never restrict the movements of swimming bears.
- Obey all local signs, barriers, guidelines, ordinances etc. regarding bear viewing practices.



## Frequently asked questions

### *How close is “too close” to polar bears?*

- Guides and viewers are expected to view bears in a manner that avoids disturbing them. Each bear’s reaction to humans is dependent on that bear’s individual tolerance and viewer’s actions. Regardless of the distance, each viewer and guide has personal responsibility to watch each bear’s behavior, and to respond appropriately. See additional information about polar bear viewing, including safety, management, biology and more, at [www.fws.gov/refuge/arctic/visitquicklinks.html](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/arctic/visitquicklinks.html).
- Viewing polar bears safely and legally requires an in-depth understanding of bear behavior. This is why you should hire guides committed to professional standards for quality polar bear viewing.

### *Whose job is it to decide how we view bears: the guide’s or the viewer’s?*

- It’s everyone’s job. Guides must only allow actions that protect you and the bears. Respect your guide’s decisions. However, it is also your responsibility as a viewer to always act in ways that do not result in a change to a bear’s natural behavior, whether you are using a guide or not.

### *Why are some activities allowed that disturb bears, but bear viewing is so carefully monitored?*

- The Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act make special allowances for subsistence hunting, scientific research, and human safety activities, as well as for some limited forms of commercial filming/photography. There are no special allowances for recreational polar bear viewing, which means that it can continue only if it is done in a way that does not disturb polar bears.

### *Why are people allowed to hunt polar bears even though the bears are threatened?*

- Polar bears were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act because of sea ice habitat loss, not because of subsistence hunting.
- The Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act provide for non-wasteful, sustainable subsistence hunting of polar bears by Native coastal-dwelling peoples, recognizing this traditional use and its cultural importance. The Marine Mammal Protection Act also provides for Alaska Native co-management partners for polar bear conservation. Their involvement helps ensure a responsible harvest.
- The North Slope Inupiat and Canadian Inuvialuit peoples have a voluntary agreement to limit the number of bears that are harvested, so their hunts won’t accelerate polar bear population decline.

### *Do commercial photographers need a special permit?*

- In most cases, yes. For further information, see the Polar Bear Source Book at [www.fws.gov/refuge/arctic/polarbearv.html](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/arctic/polarbearv.html).

### *What should I do if I see a bear in town?*

- Move to safety and then call 911 to report the location of the bear.

**The Arctic Refuge coast is unique because of its polar bear viewing opportunities and the role citizens play in polar bear conservation.**

**You have the chance to view polar bears because of the efforts of people before you to use safe viewing practices. Please do your part by following best practices when viewing polar bears.**

Polar Bears (USFWS)

