



Where are the Whales: Hunting Delays Create Empty Stomachs for Some Polar Bears

by Andy Long

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The thinness of this bear shows it really needs a meal in the not too distant future.

Much is being written and photographed about the loss of polar ice causing a decline in hunting opportunities for polar bears. A recent situation on an island off the north coast of Alaska resulted in a group of these large carnivores looking lean and in need of a quick meal. For centuries, the natives of Kaktovik on Barter Island have hunted whales for food as part of their subsistence way of life. The hunt takes place around the first of September as the whales

make their way back to the Pacific Ocean after feeding in the Arctic Ocean. The residents are not the only ones to look forward to the hunt, as polar bears start arriving before September to wait for the leftovers.

The Inupiat natives look after their polar bear friends by leaving bone carcasses as well as scraps for the bears. As many as forty-five polar bears have converged on the area to feed on the leftovers. This year, though, the bears have been out of luck because a series of unfortunate events caused a delay in the villagers getting their allotment of three bowhead whales.

Just before the start of the hunting season, one of the tribal elders died. Word went out to surrounding villages along the North Shore, and a ceremony and funeral had to wait until everyone from other villages who wanted to attend could arrive. This caused about a week's delay in the start

of the hunt.

The next blow came from the weather--and "blow" is the proper word, as winds picked up, creating impossible hunting conditions. The hunters--this year, eight boats with crews of three--can't work in poor sea conditions with large swells. They typically have to approach within ten yards of a whale in order to have a good chance of making the kill by throwing a harpoon into an area just below the whale's flipper--about one square foot in size-- where the heart and lungs are located. Each harpoon has a trigger device so that when it enters, there is a short delay before explosives attached to the harpoon go off. This impact kills the whale instantly, thus the necessity of having the hunters in the proper position. Years of practice throwing harpoons are needed before someone on each boat can assume the job of thrower. A miss that lands into another part of the whale is counted as having exhausted one chance of getting the three whales allotted--even if it doesn't kill the whale--and the hunters have a limited number of chances each season.



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Naps are a big part of the day for all of the bears.

they made their way a bit too close to the houses, a bear patrol came by to blast a couple of shots into the air with a shotgun or rifle. With subsistence hunting being a large part of life, every local household also has numerous rifles, shotguns, and pistols. Residents have no problem with going outside to shoot into the air to chase away a polar bear that is too close. Their version of an early warning system is often a dog tied up outside that will bark any time of day or night to let them know a bear is approaching.

While I was present with a workshop group, I counted sixteen polar bears roaming around the area--even though there were no whale scraps for them. Most hung out on a sandbar spit just off the island, while a few swam across to see what they could find at the bone pile of remains from previous kills-- a smaller whale killed six weeks earlier and one from last year. Some bears dared to venture into the village to look for food scraps. When

One good photo opportunity our group had happened when a mother and her two cubs came across from the spit onto the island. They worked their way along the beach and into an open field



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A mother and yearling go on the search for a meal.

Arctic Ocean, the mother we watched had done a good job of keeping herself and her two cubs fairly well fed.

After the three headed toward the village, we went to give someone a heads-up about their being in the area. The three did get “crackered” (what the locals call firing shots in the air to chase them away) throughout the night and into the next day. One person on the bear patrol was concerned about the three as they seemed to be growing bolder and not going far enough away after the shots were fired. Once bears become too accustomed to gunfire as just another loud sound, they may become more aggressive and end up having to be shot for the safety of the residents, especially all the children playing in yards and on the gravel roads.

where they took turns rolling around on the ground with legs flailing. They also found an old seal skin the youngsters played with. The young cubs were in their second summer/fall season with their mother, and one--that had to be a male--was nearly as large as his mother. Young polar bears spend three summers with their mothers before being shoed off for a life on their own. For the conditions that are evolving on Barter Island in the Beaufort Sea, and in the



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A polar bear stands by the water near where, typically, he would be feeding on the gift of food left from the villagers hunt.

Presently there are 16 bears in the area, but when a whale comes in, there will be as many as 30 to 35 bears scavenging on



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the leftovers.

However, polar bears are most often spooked by sound, as we discovered. As we passed behind the bone pile on one of our boat rides out to the spit, one bear headed straight to sea to swim away from the sound of the boat engine. Another time, a bear at the bone pile was alarmed by the noise of one of the hunting boats. Even the sound of our guide shouting turned away a third bear that had been approaching us at the spit. Polar bears may not be the only bear species that is sensitive to loud noises. I have encountered the same reaction from Alaska brown bears. When one started approaching, we clapped our hands together and called out sharply, "Go, Bear!" If the bear was merely curious, he usually took the cue to turn around. (Keep this ploy in mind if you encounter a bear that is not making a charge but rather checking things out.)

While our group was on the spit, we watched about six bears that were just meandering around--either resting or investigating what we were doing as they are very curious animals. If you stay in one place long enough and they aren't busy feeding, the bears will move closer to take a sniff. What we noticed was how thin most of them were. It had obviously been a tough year on several of them, as their coats were loose on them. We couldn't see ribs showing through, but we knew of those bears didn't get a good meal soon, they would not be starting the winter season off well.



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**The hunt finally begins...
Will the bears be fed soon?**

On our last day on the island before flying back to Fairbanks, all eight hunting boats headed out quite early, with hopes of getting the first whale of the season. Word came in early that they spotted two whales and were beginning pursuit. If the timing had been right, we might have been lucky enough to catch some shots of them pulling the whale up onto the land before beginning their ceremony and cutting. No such luck--word came back that they

were coming back in without a catch! There were several possible reasons why the hunt might have been unsuccessful. One might have been the hunters couldn't get in position to make the throw based on the whale's movement or the sea conditions. Another might have been the size of the whale, because target whales much have a certain size range. If the prey had been too small or too large, the hunters wouldn't have made an attempt.

The hunters had several more days of clear, calm weather to look forward to before forecasted snows in hopes of getting their allotment of three whales. Snow would have made the whale hunt more difficult, creating problems for both the people and the bears. It's bad enough for the bears that they sometimes have to swim for three hours or more to move from ice pack to ice pack, but when a known food source such as the whale scraps isn't available, life and survival for the bears becomes even tougher. To help, the villagers are looking into doing extra seal hunting to leave meat out for the bears, but additional hunting will require approval from a variety of groups, a task that might take several years. In the meantime, the wait is on for whales to be caught--year after year.

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