

BY KIDS FOR KIDS



Sharing Arctic Tidbits with Kids

by Moki Kokoris



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Editor's note: PBI member Moki Kokoris, pictured left, was the first Ukrainian woman to reach the North Pole, where she planted a flag for her country. She now gives talks on polar bears and the Arctic to school children.

For me, there are few more rewarding pleasures in life than bringing bits and pieces of the Arctic, the realm of our majestic ice bear, into the world of children's minds.



Ever since I was a child myself, I've been interested in all things polar. While so many of my friends were reading books like *Black Beauty* and *Nancy*

Drew, I was sitting on the edge of my bed leafing through photograph-laden pages about the expeditions of Byrd and Shackleton. I wished I could have been alongside such brave explorers, experiencing the magnificence of the true North and South. None of the hardship they endured could frighten those wishes away. Still in my braided pig-tails, I vowed to one day set foot upon degree 90 at the very top of our planet, even though that dream seemed so unattainable at the time.

On Top of the World

The time it took for this dream to come true was long, but it did

become reality in April, 2003. The expedition I signed up for could in no way compare to the logistics or the accomplishments of Byrd's or Shackleton's, but as the perpetual 24-hour day shifted from April 18th to the 19th, the soles of my insulated boots finally reached that long-awaited goal. As I stood on that



sacred spot, turning around a full 360-degrees to be able to say that I literally gazed around the whole globe, I experienced what I still to this very day call "Polar Nirvana." It was the most

moving moment of my life. In that instant, I made a new vow. And that vow was to do whatever I could to share that feeling with others in attempts to preserve it for future insulated boots to experience.

For that reason, I now carry that message into the classroom. However, it is not only the polar ice cap I would like to help preserve, it is also the wild inhabitants of it. I chose to focus my efforts on the

polar bear, which had been my favorite animal all my life. I'd been a member of Polar Bears International for a number of years, and had found this organization's efforts and work worthwhile and important. What better way to further their efforts than to "spread the word"? So, in a sense, I have become somewhat of a polar conservation missionary.

Arctic Outreach

It all started with a friend who is a school teacher in Long Island, New York. She saw how excited I became whenever I talked about the Arctic, the ice, the snow, the polar bears, and in wanting to tap into



that energy, she asked me if I would be willing to give a little talk to her 4th grade class about my experiences. Naturally, having been a teacher at

EXCERPTS FROM KIDS' LETTERS

The following are excerpts from children's letters which were written to me after I visited various classrooms with my outreach talks about the Arctic. It's so rewarding to read them and to see that they listened and learned many things they hadn't known. I hope that we, together in partnership with children, can work toward making a difference in saving our polar ice caps along with the animals who live there.

Dear Moki,

Thank you for coming. I really enjoyed your presentation. It was one of the best presentations I've ever heard. I learned a lot from you. What I enjoyed most was you telling us interesting facts about the Arctic and the North Pole. The best part was the polar bear skull you brought in. At first I thought it was a dinosaur skull! And it was so heavy! Polar bears must be really beautiful on the ice. Thank you for teaching me so much.

Sincerely,
Emily
(Munsey Park school)

Dear Moki,

Thank you so much for taking time to come to our school. I learned that on Svalbard schools are fenced in so no polar bears can get in. I also learned that reindeer are allowed anywhere they please. I learned a lot, but it wasn't like reading a book, you showed us a slideshow. That was great! I liked it so much because you weren't just telling us things, you let us touch and hold things like the head skeleton of the polar bear which was really neat. I never knew they were that big!

Sincerely,
Katie
(Miss Macaluso's 4th grade class)



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one time myself, I could not resist such an opportunity to



make an impression on young minds. I collected whatever material I thought would help in my “Show & Tell” presentation. Soon after, I found myself the center of attention, with a roomful of eager wide-eyed and open-mouthed 10 and 11-year olds who sat and listened to my words with great interest and awe.

That was the beginning. Currently, I have many such “talks” under my belt, in a much wider circle of schools and youth organizations now, and not surprisingly, my “Show & Tell” bag of arctic tricks bulges with artifacts to the point of zipper failure. I believe it is most important that children not only sit and listen to their lessons, but that they also “feel” them via tactile means. This is the only way they can truly absorb the importance of my message. Observing objects in a case behind glass such as they do in a museum has much less of an impact. They must hold and touch these things in order to really grasp ideas.

Magic Artifacts

In my polar bag, I carry a reindeer hide, a reindeer antler, and various expedition clothing which I had worn during my various trips to the Arctic—both before as well as after

the North Pole expedition—such as my Siberian fur hat. Of polar bear things, I have a pair of polar bear fur mittens from an Inuit in Greenland, a polar bear canine tooth, toys which zoo polar bears have played with and punctured with their teeth, and replicas of a polar bear claw and skull. Each of these items is passed around the classroom at various times during my talks.

It never ceases to amaze me how the children react to these things once they are able to hold and touch them.

Inevitably, there are hundreds of questions about polar bears afterwards. This is where my message becomes most valuable. Once they’ve held the skull, the tooth, the claw, and they’ve felt the thickness of the fur, they can truly understand that this powerful beast is to be admired from a distance, but at the same time respected and protected. By touching and feeling, the message is best conveyed and remembered.

However, as powerful as the polar bear itself is, it sadly has no power over what happens to its environment, and this is precisely where the children themselves can help by taking this message back home, and by “spreading the word” themselves. Global warming is a reality, and whether it is a naturally occurring planetary cycle or we ourselves have brought it on is not the main issue. The issue is that we have the power to slow it, if not to arrest, its progressive damage. As minuscule as we may each seem to be as individuals, as a group, we do have the ability to make necessary changes to preserve our ice bear’s habitat. Fossil fuels

certainly make matters worse. Pollution of other kinds affects the polar ice caps no less. Wastes, both chemical and natural, carelessly dumped into oceans have taken a toll on polar bear population and breeding. Better practices must be adopted by us all. Even something as trivial as recycling can become part of these positive global changes.

The children to whom I speak not only listen to my message, but they also hear it. Not only do they hear it, but they pass on the information I give them. It’s



discussed at the dinner table that night, and if we’re lucky, the parents discuss the same subject near the water-cooler at the office the following day. And so the acorn grows into an oak tree.

In exchange for my visit, I request that each child write me a brief letter, telling me what they enjoyed learning about most. I now am the proud recipient of hundreds of these letters, each of them precious in its own way. Proof to me that I, as an individual, can indeed make a difference, as well as convince others that this planet is worth saving for all it has to offer.

Who knew there could be such deep meaning in a polar bear claw when held by a child? *

A RECIPE FOR SAVING THE ARCTIC

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 large duffel bag
- 1 very fluffy Siberian fur hat
- 1 reindeer hide
- 1 reindeer antler
- 2 polar bear fur mittens
- 1 genuine polar bear canine fang tooth
- 1 replica polar bear claw
- 1 replica polar bear skull
- 2 polar bear “toys”
- 4 sets of PBI fact sheets

UTENSILS:

- 1 classroom
- 1 large table
- 1 laptop computer
- 1 globe
- 1 Arctic map
- 1 group of eager children
- 1 teacher
- 1 polar missionary/explorer/speaker

DIRECTIONS:

Carefully remove all of the ingredients from the duffel and lay them out on the large table. Add the globe on one side, and the computer at the center. Have group of eager children sit in front of the table so that they can all see the computer screen. (By privilege, the teacher has free choice of seating.) Place the polar missionary/explorer/speaker behind the table ñ the Arctic map and all ingredients within arm’s reach. Listen carefully while the story unfolds.

Dear Moki,
 Thanks a lot for teaching me so much. I hope maybe you can come again because I really enjoyed it! I also loved the things that you shared. What I thought was really cool was the big fuzzy mittens, the polar bear skull and the claw. It was a fun presentation, but now I want to know even more about the polar bear and how I can help them. Thanks a bunch!

sincerely,
 Nicole (Ms. Macaluso’s class)

Dear Moki,
 Thank you for teaching me all the cool facts that you know about the Arctic. It was very fun to listen to you describe your journey to the North Pole. I learned lots of things like that the snow and ice are not only white but also blue. The slide show had lots of cool, weird, and funny pictures. My favorite was the one with your friend, Helmut, under the polar bear in the Svalbard museum! I never knew polar bears were so huge and ferocious! The skeleton head was also very interesting. Someday I want to see a real polar bear in the wild, and I hope we can do things to help polar bears live forever. Thanks for coming!

From,
 Charlie
 (Manhasset, NY)

Dear Moki,
 I really liked your lesson and I really learned a lot. I know it’s very dangerous on the ice, but it looks like it could be so much fun to go there, and I want to go to meet a real polar bear, but not too close! I would be scared but they are so special! I hope you come back to our school again sometime.

from,
 Allison
 (Munsey Park School)