

Observing Indigenous Wisdom by Way of the “Flying Bear”

by Moki Kokoris

As the Earth continues to warm, our attention is inevitably drawn to the profound impacts rising temperatures have on the natural world. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Arctic where the consequences of a changing environment are felt more directly and intensely by the indigenous people and creatures and the ecosystem upon which they rely. The lives of man and beast alike are being permanently altered, and yet they remain intricately intertwined as integral threads in the tapestry of polar subsistence.

Whether they are among the Inuit, Chukchi, Yup'ik, Nenets or Samoyed, all Arctic indigenous peoples have deep traditional and spiritual connections with the animals of the Far North, particularly the polar bear. While the rest of the world may view this charismatic creature solely as the symbol or ambassador of the Arctic, it also plays a significant material and cultural role in the lives of the native people who have coexisted with it for millennia. Since humans and polar bears possess similar qualities and traits, none of these indigenous groups has ever viewed the bear strictly as a resource.

Native hunters across the Arctic still harvest polar bears for clothing and food, but an intimate relationship between the hunter and his prey strongly persists, though with varying nuances depending on the cultural group and region.



How We Used to Hunt Polar Bear – by artists Imoona Karpik & Sowdluq Nakasook

Originally descendants of Yenisey taiga fishermen and hunters, the Kets of eastern Siberia regard the polar bear as their ancestor and refer to it as *gyp*, meaning grandfather. In their culture, the bear is a spiritual guardian.

The Nenets of the Khatanga region in northern Siberia valued the polar bear's canine teeth particularly and wore them as talismans. The teeth were also traded in villages further south and used by the forest-dwelling people as protection against brown bears. The belief was that "little nephew" would not dare attack a man wearing the tooth of its powerful "big uncle."

The Inuit view themselves as equal partners with all the animals within their territories, but certain species are worshipped in a more spiritual sense because they are believed to possess divine powers. Seals represent intelligence and friendship, whales symbolize wisdom and good luck, and reindeer are associated with rain. But it is the polar bear whose characteristics of power, courage and endurance are most highly valued as is evidenced in Inuit legends, hunting rituals, religious ceremonies and art.

According to some Inuit beliefs, the Great Spirit who controls the caribou often takes the form of a white bear. Only a shaman possesses the power to influence that spirit to send caribou to the Inuit during times of starvation. Inversely, it is the "flying bear" spirit that can take the shaman to the sky or the sea from where he summons help for his people.

Another Inuit legend tells of a polar bear escaping a hunt by climbing into the night sky, and describes the three stars of Orion's belt as the hunters who continue their pursuit in single file.

In western Alaska, the polar bear is considered to be the father of the Yup'ik people, and the spirit of the polar bear is often invoked as a witness to the taking of oaths. Polar bear claws are hung near entrances of dwellings to ward off evil spirits, and the Yup'ik also believe that the claws have therapeutic qualities and can cure headaches.

Although some traditions vary from village to village, the Yupik people of northeastern Siberia perform a special rite called *inegnintitku* immediately after killing a bear to prevent offending the bear's soul. The polar bear's head is turned toward the east, and the hunter kneels and addresses the animal's head by saying, "You go back home now. The road to my house is very bad, so please visit us some time later." Then the special polar bear ceremony of thanks and celebration begins with the hunter giving the bear a "drink" of fresh water as well as pieces of reindeer meat, bread, and sometimes candies, during which he says, "These are your provisions to eat on the way to the Upper World." The hunter then asks the bear for forgiveness, reminding the bear's spirit that its body had been taken not for fun or sport but for food and clothing.

Only after these rites are completed is bear's meat distributed among the residents of the settlement so that all may benefit from its sustenance. On the second day, the men from the village bring the bear's skull to the ancestral sacrifice mound and cover it with stones to protect it from dogs. A shaman or elder casts spells and expresses his gratitude to the spirit of the distinguished guest for not harming the hunter who so capably and respectfully ensured his community's prosperity. Other members of the celebration group play tambourines or drums and sing to please the animal's soul while enacting scenes from the hunt.

On Russia's Chukotka Peninsula, present day government protection, management and hunting rules notwithstanding, polar bear hunting has historically been strictly regulated. Because the Chukchi people believe that they and polar bears share and interchange spirits, no bear is allowed to be killed without direct permission from the community's eldest hunter. Many rituals are

performed prior to a hunt. After a bear has finally been taken, no other bears may be hunted by the village members for a prolonged period of time, and the bear's spirit continues to be honored for many months.

Custom dictates that whenever a bear is killed on the ice, it should fall with its head toward the mainland so that its spirit can return to shore, and thereby bring further good luck to the hunters. By government regulation, only an indigenous person is allowed to own a polar bear hide. Even though the pelt may be sold, it is more often used as a tablecloth during the traditional thanksgiving ceremonies.

Another indication that the Chukchi are intimately familiar with the polar bear and its behavior is the fact that they have nearly two dozen name variations for it, among them: *nenenel'yn* for a nursing female, *turk'liketyl'yn* for a recently matured three-year old bear, *ymel'yn* for a bear that is moving over land, *al'ek'atyl'yn* for a bear moving on the water, *nygsek* for an adult male with very white fangs, and *mervel'yn* for a hungry, thin, exhausted bear. The extraordinarily descriptive terms unequivocally prove that indigenous people are by necessity precision observers. These generations-old accounts can be invaluable to scientists studying different polar bear populations because they offer prevalent and up-to-date localized data.

Fundamentally, it is the ancient traditional beliefs and interactions that are essential components to the sacred bond that exists between indigenous people and not only the polar bear but the natural world as an interconnected whole. By striking and maintaining this critical balance between the physical and spiritual they ensure their collective survival.

As many conservationists and environmentalists strive to protect the polar bear from harm and demise, it is important to remember that the bear does not exist in isolation. We must equally protect the ancestral pact the indigenous people have with it. Aware as we are about the polar bear's vulnerability to exploitation, throughout history traditional rituals and religious observances inherently limited the quantity of bears taken and curbed human influence on their populations, guaranteeing sustainable harmony. While some government oversight and regulation is necessary to prevent overhunting, prohibiting all harvesting – even by native hunters – inevitably compromises ecological thinking and leads to loss of cultural identity, all of which could hasten the catastrophic consequences on the polar bear, especially in the current economic climate.

Through their sacred traditional practices, the native peoples have always been the species' guardians. Ultimately, just as the polar bear has been the *gyp* and the spiritual guardian and guide to many of the Arctic's indigenous cultures, it is their indigenous wisdom that should now guide our decisions, policies and path forward as it relates to protecting the big white bear and its “flying bear” spirit.

