

Polar Bear Hunting Viewed Through Indigenous Crosshairs

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The *ICON ON ICE: International Trade and Management of Polar Bears* report states: “Managers, biologists, Arctic communities and conservation organizations may have differing opinions or different methods for achieving and measuring success or failure. However, they do share a common goal: to conserve polar bears.”

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Whether or not they subscribe to the science of human-induced global warming, tourists flock to the areas where polar bears can be viewed in their natural surroundings. The urgency to glimpse the majestic creatures “before it’s too late” is palpable, and staunch environmentalists have made the species the symbol of their various causes and advocacy campaigns.

An ostensible icon of the Arctic, the polar bear is attracting ever-increasing international attention. As the Far North continues to warm and the ecosystem is poised to experience an inevitable dramatic transition, this sentinel species has become the primary focus of conservation efforts, some of them misguided. Along with consequences for the polar bears themselves, the impacts of impending changes will affect not only their habitat, but also the lifestyles of the indigenous communities who have lived in harmony with the bears for countless generations.

Having evolved, adapted, and altered their distribution in relation to shifts in climate, landscape, and resource availability, all indigenous peoples throughout the Arctic region have a deep-rooted relationship with their environment. Wildlife and its spiritual significance have been central in the development of many Northern cultures, and often play an integral role in their respective oral histories, traditions, and mythologies. Even in the face of

societal pressures of globalization, many indigenous groups continue to rely on herding, fishing, and hunting as their primary sources of subsistence, each of which enables the people to maintain their social, cultural and spiritual identities.

For the Inuit specifically, the polar bear and the hunting of it are means by which the hunters and their culture have defined themselves for thousands of years as is portrayed in northern art and legends. A traditional activity that ensures cultural cohesion and provides sustenance for the community, the polar bear hunt is a source of prestige, accomplishment and pride – but always with deep respect paid to the bear, even in death.

Just as one traditional story claims that *nanuk* was a man in disguise who would shed his pelt upon entering his home, there are many other legends and rituals associated with the taking of a polar bear. Once killed, the bear's body would be oriented with its head facing north, and water was poured into its mouth as the last drink before its journey. The hunter might even hang the bearskin inside his igloo for a few days to give its spirit sufficient time to settle into the afterlife. Occasionally the bear's spirit would be offered gifts. Such customs allowed the killed bear to share with other polar bears how well its spirit had been treated so that they, too, might one day agree to be hunted.

Traditional knowledge dictates that as little as possible of any bear taken is wasted. Its meat is shared with the whole community, the prime parts offered to the elders. Its bones are carved into tools and handicrafts, the hide fashioned into clothing (i.e. fur pants, mittens, boots or mukluks, fur ruffs for parkas), and various raw membranes are used to make instruments such as traditional drums and shamanistic implements.

Because polar bear hunting is a controversial and invariably contentious issue, and particularly since there are so many regulatory aspects and data to consider, it is difficult to establish a single viewpoint or recommended course that will guarantee an optimal conservation outcome. The complexities of the issues notwithstanding, we should nevertheless strive to foster a balanced and objective discourse, without marginalizing the indigenous frame of reference.

It is important to note that the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears and subsequent conservation efforts and actions taken by polar bear range countries (the United States, Canada, Greenland/Denmark, Norway, and Russia) have helped to preserve polar bear populations in much of their historic territories, but it is essential to bring attention to the fact that representatives of Northern indigenous groups are not yet being given equal bearing at policy-making tables.

Fundamentally, not only to the aboriginal peoples of the Arctic but to all indigenous cultures who inhabit this Earth, the ultimate edict is that man is not *distinct from* nature but is a *part of it*. Human beings are an inherent component of the ecosystem as a whole. We in the industrialized – and seemingly more civilized – world have lost our connection with nature. When we are hungry, we have the luxury of buying our food in prepackaged form, and we rarely think about all the steps required to bring it to our shelves in that state. Likewise, when we are cold, we have the option of purchasing a thick parka that we choose from a store rack. How often do we question where the goose down that will keep us warm came from or how it is collected? To most of us who are accustomed to modern day conveniences, the concept of subsistence is foreign, and yet our tendency is to judge those who live in a very basic and direct relationship with an environment that is the sole source of food, shelter and clothing.

Many television programs and films feature nature as it really is “out in the wild.” As we observe the dynamic interplay between the hunter and the hunted, the majority of us will hope that the seal escapes the polar bear's attack, but at the same time, we grieve for the polar bear mother who lost her cubs to starvation, her own future in jeopardy. Only when we view the seal and polar bear jointly do we grasp the relationship in which the two species exists. Moreover, considering the indigenous conviction that humans are an equal constituent in that same environment and ecosystem, why would we not condone the hunter's pursuit to take a seal or polar bear that will feed and clothe not just the hunter's own family but many others in the community? These are the principal rules of nature.

Native peoples around the globe do not presume that they are superior to the animals they hunt because they understand that humans are intimately intertwined with the ecosystem and are intrinsic to the cycle. They respect the interconnectivity of the natural world by taking only what they need, thereby maintaining a sustainable balance that guarantees survival for all. How could their lifestyle be criticized as unethical in comparison to ours of over-consumption and little regard for how our behavior affects the planet?

Perhaps without considering the negative repercussions of their biased crusades, and as well-meaning as their intentions may be, “save the seals” or “save the polar bears” flag-waving activists who categorically oppose all hunting – including harvests based on sustainable quota systems – may not realize that they are wrongfully removing man from the system of ecological interdependence. In taking that stance, the protesters are unjustly condemning native hunters for following millennia-old practices that manifest as much respect for their quarry as for man’s place in the symbiotic natural order of life. We would do well to honor this perennial indigenous wisdom.

There may be many valid opinions on the topic of polar bear hunting, however, the indigenous perspective remains the most crucial scope through which all of us should view the issue. By granting the native peoples the freedom to hunt polar bears as they always have, we are helping them preserve their subsistence cultures, and in the process we are entrusting the future of the polar bear to the people who best understand and can safeguard its place in our world.



Young Inuit Greenlanders in traditional seal and polar bear fur clothing.

Photo credit: I Love Greenland