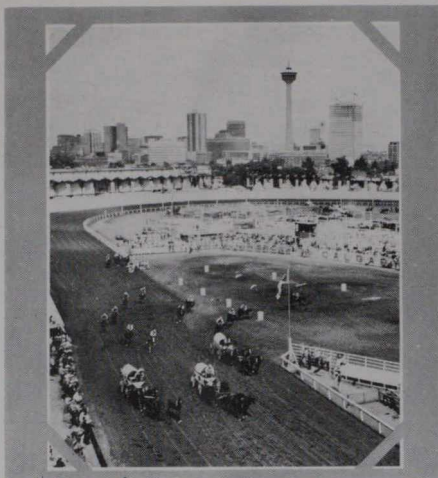


Cover photo shows a typical scene at the annual Calgary Stampede held in early July.

Canada Today



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Conservation protects man's enemy

By Jenny Pearson

"Let it be" say the conservation posters, featuring among other threatened animals the magnificent polar bear, the darling of British zoo visitors — especially when it produces one of its irresistible young to swim and snuggle in the public view. "Aaaah!" we exclaim. But in the north of Canada this beautiful, shambling creature has a long tradition of enmity with man which is far from being a dead letter.

In the legends and hunting stories of the Eskimos the polar bear is the most monstrous of enemies. Though a valuable prize to those possessed of the skill to hunt him down, providing a mountain of meat and warm fur for clothing, the process of doing so with the harpoons of old could and often did take a high toll of lives. One bear might easily cost several men in the killing.

Today guns have made the hunting of polar bears a much less hazardous occupation and within the framework of international conservation, they are still hunted by Canada's native peoples. Oddly enough, the danger from polar bears has now shifted ground and the people most vulnerable to their capricious crunching of humans that cross their path are the whites who have come comparatively recently to live and work in the areas they inhabit.

Danger town

In Churchill, Manitoba, for instance, the threat to human life is taken very seriously because this Hudson Bay seaport lies directly on the migration route between the Arctic ice floes which are the bears' winter hunting ground and the inland dens south of the port where they retire to hibernate before the ice moves out of the bay. There is a danger period each autumn when the bears emerge from their dens and wander back to the coast, finding miles of open water barring their way to the ice floes. Following their natural migration route northwards, the animals tend to wander into the outskirts of the town and scavenge around the rubbish dump. A number of residents have been mauled and six years ago a child was killed after stumbling into a reclining animal on a bush path.

At first the only solution was to shoot the marauding bears. Then in 1971 the International Fund for Animal Welfare started a programme to trap them and fly them out into the wilderness. Last year 11 bears were shot with tranquiliser guns, caged and flown out. If they got rumbustious

during the flight they were soothed with peace-offerings of doughnuts. The only untoward incident was a ripped pocket of an airline employee who got too close to a cage during loading. A further eight potentially dangerous bears had to be shot dead. An incinerator in place of the old garbage dump has also helped.

Bears come back

Trouble arises from the fact that polar bears are not so anxious to avoid humans as humans are to avoid them. After unloading from the aeroplanes, some have to be encouraged on their way into the wilderness with a blast from a flare gun. Some seem actually to prefer to hang around the bright lights of Churchill and return there after deportation. A mother bear and two cubs deposited 300 miles away padded their way back to the town in 18 days.

Since the tricky relationship between people and bears around Churchill looks like being a continuing problem, conservation officers there frequently lecture school children and adults about how to live with the animals. The basic message seems to be to play it safe, staying away from rocks and bushes where bears are likely to be hidden and not to go wandering around in the dark. As one conservation officer remarked, "Polar bears are certainly one of Manitoba's finest natural resources but also the hardest to manage."

The special problem of bears attracted by the human environment was underlined in January by a terrible incident in which an 18-year-old oil worker was killed by a polar bear at a Mackenzie Delta oil rig 100 miles north of Inuvik. When eventually the bear was shot it was found to have three metal tags attached to it, indicating that it had been tranquilised and removed from civilisation at least three times.

Fearless animal

Another worker in the camp who asked not to be identified told the *Globe and Mail* of Toronto that the camp was not equipped with a rifle, even though polar bears were known to frequent the area around it. The only weapon available to the men was a flare pistol, but although they fired a flare at the animal and drove bulldozers at it, it held on to remains of the dead man and showed little fear of these activities.

The victim was attacked as he walked