

# The Cochrane Polar Bear Habitat

Our Mission: To make a significant contribution to the sustainability of polar bears, using exceptional care standards, engagement through education and targeted conservation efforts.



# THE BEARS

At 10 years old, Henry is now fully grown yet he continues to surpass the others in size. While extra fat is essential to the survival of polar bears in the wild, bears in human care will never be at risk of starvation (although Henry sometimes acts as though he is!) Henry's diet often needs to be tweaked to ensure he is not becoming over weight and consequently putting too much pressure on his joints. With that being said, he is in the prime of his life, in perfect health and continues to enjoy his time with Inukshuk. As he gets older, Henry has begun to enjoy the calmer aspects of life and more often can be found curled up in a big straw bed, leaf pile of day bed dug in the snow.



Henry, showing off his impressive girth



Ganuk, interacting with his environment



Ganuk continues his slow and steady approach to life. He recently celebrated his 14th birthday and we still consider him our 'gentle giant'. Ganuk's willingness to participate in voluntary training for veterinary care continues to impress all who visit him, especially our veterinary team who he reliably allows to take blood from him when he is wide awake. Ganuk prefers his own space separate from Henry and Inukshuk, but has developed his own unique ways of demanding extra attention from the animal care team who, of course, willingly oblige every time.



Inukshuk, showing his strength when crushing a barrel.

Inukshuk, our most senior resident, turned 21 this year! He is still very healthy and stays active by exploring his enclosures, interacting with enrichments and wrestling with Henry most days. The Animal Care Team is taking a proactive approach to his health as he ages and will be making changes to his care plan as needed. Male polar bears in human care typically live into their mid twenties to early thirties, so we hope to still have many years to share with him.



# VETERINARY CARE

In most other facilities, polar bears are sedated annually in order to conduct procedures such as physical exams, blood draws and x-rays. Here, the high level of voluntary veterinary training our bears receive has allowed us to care for them without the need for sedation in over 8 years. While these behaviours have allowed us to achieve a lot, there are some procedures that are best done under anesthetic, which was done this month with all three bears.

To ensure the health and safety of the bears and humans involved, we enlisted the help of Dr. Sherri Cox of the National Wildlife Centre, who has had many years experience sedating and working with wild polar bears. Under her watchful eye, each bear was sedated and a range of tests were conducted and samples taken. One test in particular was an allergy test conducted on Ganuk, who has shown symptoms that could potentially be connected to a seasonal sensitivity. A specialist veterinary dermatologist from Toronto, Dr. Stephen Waisglass, was flown in to conduct a scratch test on Ganuk's chest, with the hopes of understanding what he may be reacting to.

The bears all recovered well from their procedures and the information we have gained will be used to further develop our ongoing care strategies for each bear.



Henry under sedation, being work on by Dr. Cox (middle), Dr. Millson (left) and the Animal Care Team (right).



Dr. Millson and Alyssa preparing the sedation medications



Dr. Waisglass conducting the allergy test on Ganuk



Ganuk having a well deserved snooze after his procedures

# FUNDRAISING

As a non-profit organization, we rely heavily on the generosity of donors to provide vital care for the bears, maintain the home in which they live and support growth of the Centre.

Thanks to our generous donors in 2023, we held a number of successful campaigns. These included:

- The Summer Watermelon Fund - \$8723
- Ganuk's 14th Birthday - \$1573
- New monthly donations signups - 10

This is in addition to our ongoing fundraising campaign called 'Become a Bear Care Donor!' which raised a little over \$54,000.

These campaigns and general donations support the care of the bears by helping us to purchase food, veterinary care, medications, enrichment items, specialist veterinary equipment.



Ganuk investigating a new enrichment



Austin and Kearin holding the bears' new pickle toys



A pallet load of donated watermelons

To help support our fundraising efforts, a Sponsorship Team consisting of dedicated volunteers has been created. This team will assist PBH staff in reaching out to corporate sponsors and identifying grant opportunities to help facilitate growth of the Habitat's three core objectives: exceptional polar bear care, engagement through education, and targeted conservation efforts.

The largest fundraising initiative of 2024 will be to upgrade and expand the interpretive signage and interactive exhibits throughout the Centre. The expansion will focus heavily on climate change and the effect it has on the arctic ecosystem. This project will be conducted in partnership with Science North who are experts in creating interactive and educational exhibits, and will be paid for entirely by donations and corporate sponsorship. A kind and generous initial donation of \$75,000 from the Board of the former Canadian Polar Bear Habitat will help jump-start this process.

# MARKETING AND AWARENESS

Partnerships with organizations such as Tourism Cochrane, Northeastern Ontario Tourism and Destination Northern Ontario have helped to increase awareness of the Polar Bear Habitat. Representatives from these organizations travel around the world to various tourism summits and proudly speak about the work we do and how they can get involved and support us.

As the only year-round attraction in Cochrane, the Habitat plays a vital role in supporting the economic development of our community. We pride ourselves on offering an edu-tourism opportunity that connects visitors with this iconic species, whilst still upholding our core values of animal welfare, education and conservation.



PBH team members standing proudly with the new billboard

In 2023, we invested in a large billboard featuring Inukshuk, right by the Tim Hortons here in Cochrane. This striking promotion, which will be in place for many years to come, greets drive-through customers and can even be seen from the highway.

Thanks to Tourism Cochrane, for two weeks in October we were featured on bright, backlit LED billboards on the 400 series highways in the Greater Toronto area that reached hundreds of thousands of commuters every day.



The electronic billboard, featuring Henry, clearly lit up along the 44 series highways in Toronto.



A social media advertisement created by Northeastern Ontario Tourism, highlighting the Polar Bear Habitat as one of their top 7 attraction in the north.

# EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Our Education Committee, chaired by Animal Care Team Leader Kearin Goff, has been working hard to improve our educational programming which includes guided tours, educational talks and curriculum based learning opportunities. A shift to virtual learning by many schools has allowed us to connect with students and teachers across the province, helping us to extend our reach beyond pre-pandemic capabilities.

Last fall, PBH Manager Amy, and Austin of the animal care team, attended the Bear TAG (Taxonomic Advisory Group) conference in Detroit, Michigan. They were invited to present on the variable and seasonal management techniques used when working with our bears. Being the only Centre in the world dedicated solely to polar bears, their expertise was highly unique and well received. Attending conferences such as these provides valuable learning opportunities and enables us to forge connections with bear care experts from across North America.



Austin presenting at the Bear TAG conference in Detroit



A group photo of the conference attendees in Detroit



A wild mother and cub observed by Amy on the Tundra Buggies.

Amy was fortunate to spend four days out on the Tundra Buggies, where she witnessed wild polar bears in their natural environment, all while helping to provide valuable information and context for the visitors on board. When not educating the public, Amy was speaking with and learning from top polar bear researchers also working with Polar Bears International during the fall. She also used this opportunity to raise awareness for the unique, sub-arctic environment in which the Polar Bear Habitat is located and our desire to take part in conservation initiatives.

Last fall, Amy spent two weeks in Churchill, Manitoba volunteering her time and knowledge as a Field Ambassador for Polar Bears International (PBI). In this role, Amy shared her expertise and experience to educate the public about polar bears, climate change and the effect it is having on the arctic ecosystem, with the ultimate goal of encouraging meaningful change.



A young bear smelling Tundra Buggy tour guests

# CONSERVATION

A core element of our mission is to provide researchers with unique opportunities to work with our bears in order to help wild bears. One such opportunity presented itself when planning for the sedation procedures, thanks to our collaborative relationship with Polar Bears International. A new style of polar bear tracking device is currently being developed by Polar Bears International and the engineering department at 3M (the Post-it note people) and we were selected to try this new technology.

The project, aptly named Burr on Fur, aims to design a smaller, less invasive tracking device that can be used on any age and either sex of polar bear in the wild. While the bears were safely sedated, our animal care team fitted one device on each of the bears. The bears and the prototype tags will be monitored closely over the coming weeks. A report detailing the bears' reactions to wearing the tag and the longevity of the devices attachment will be made to the researchers at Polar Bears International, once all of the tags have naturally fallen off. This information will then be used as data within a scientific paper!



Jen and Brooke fitting Henry with a Burr on Fur tag



Kearin and Gail fitting Inukshuk with a Burr on Fur tag



The 'crimp plate' method of attachment on Henry



The 'Tri-brush' method of attachment on Inukshuk

# EVENTS

Following the success of the previous year's event, the 2023 2nd Annual Western Gaming Show and Heritage Days was run over two days last summer. The purpose of this event is to bring life to the Heritage Village and raise much needed funds for its repair. The event featured various vendors and live demonstrations, including needlework, wood carving and blacksmithing, as well as food, drinks, and people in period-time costumes. The Western Gaming Show was held in our refreshed riding arena and featured over 40 competitors in various events. We welcomed nearly 600 visitors to the event, which went off without a hitch thanks to an amazing team of volunteers. As a result of its success, this event has already been booked again for 2024!

As always, the bears' comfort and welfare during events is our top priority, and we're happy to say that there were no observed changes in the bears behaviour during and after the event. A benefit of having approximately 60 acres of land means that we were able to keep the horses well away from the bears, so neither were affected by each other's presence.



A rider in the Western Gaming Show competing in the poles discipline.



Volunteer, Gary Martin, teaching visitors about wood carving

To wrap up the year in 2023, we participated in a traveling exhibition presented by Science North and Indigenous Tourism Ontario (Developed and produced in consultation with Montreal Science Centre). The exhibition presented a clever and novel mix of science and culture intended to stir a sense of pride among First Nation, Inuit and Métis communities and celebrate the diversity, interconnectedness, and resourceful ways of knowing and being, that Indigenous knowledge and innovations provide in the global community. It involved multiple interactive educational features aimed at schools and student visitors.



Volunteer, Dan Girard, demonstrating blacksmithing



A section of the Indigenous Ingenuity exhibit



# LOOKING AHEAD IN 2024

We will be celebrating our 20th anniversary in 2024!

Plans have begun for a Gala celebration to acknowledge the Habitat's 20 years of being the world's only centre for polar bears in need of human care, as well as to thank those who have made it happen, and will be supportive of the Habitat for many generations to come.

Our goals for 2024 include embracing new education and conservation projects with funding from generous sponsors like you, and new individual donors and corporate sponsors.

Some of these projects include the aforementioned upgrades to the Welcome Centre and Viewers' Building that we expect to undertake in 2024 with our partners at Science North. Cochrane Town Council has been fabulously supportive of our initiatives to date, and we welcome and are grateful for their support and continued participation.

Every project we undertake will support the Habitat's three core objectives: care, education, and conservation. This will enable even higher standards of polar bear care, and allow us to better inform and engage with those who visit the Habitat in person or by virtual means. The results will lead us to our overall goal of becoming a Centre of excellence.

We're excited for the Cochrane Polar Bear Habitat's future, and are so pleased and grateful for your interest, input and generous support. None of this could happen without you.

Our sincerest thanks, from the Polar Bear Habitat team.

