

Polar Bears, Enduring Legacies

Lori Lambert, Ph.D. and R.N., (Abenaki, Mi'kmaq) spent parts of last fall and winter in Churchill, Manitoba -- on the edge of the iced-over Hudson Bay -- studying polar bears. She's worked there periodically since 1988 with Dr. Chuck Jonkel of the University of Montana, "as he studies and teaches arctic field ecology and polar bear biology of Manitoba's northwestern edge of Hudson Bay." Lori explains that the group lives and works at the Churchill Northern Studies Centre, 23 kilometers outside the town of Churchill. If you aren't sure where Churchill is, see the map (right, from Google Earth; the yellow star signifies Churchill's location). And if you aren't sure how far north Churchill really is, see the picture of local Churchill hot-spot "Gypsy's" at 3 in the afternoon beneath it (taken by Frank Tyro, used with permission; Frank also took the polar bear photo.).



So why study polar bears? Lori had two reasons. The first is that she was preparing educational materials for the Enduring Legacies Native Cases Project of Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington (<http://www.evergreen.edu/tribal/cases/>). This project "aims to develop teaching resources and culturally relevant curriculum in the form of case studies on key issues in Indian country. Key topics have been identified by Native leaders through a delphi process of brainstorming and prioritizing key issues affecting Native Americans." Lori, Vice-Chair of Tapestry's Board of Directors and a long-time friend, has been (for even longer!) deeply engaged in distance learning through her position on the faculty of Salish Kootenai Tribal College on the Flathead Indian Reservation near Pablo, Montana. You can access Lori's work at the Enduring Legacies website.

But, as Lori points out in her report for Evergreen State, polar bears are an important legacy themselves, and one deeply and meaningfully connected to the local Indigenous peoples of the Arctic. With feet as webbed as those of sea otters and tremendous swimming abilities, polar bears have been classified as sea mammals by the world's wildlife legislation bodies. But sea ice is melting so rapidly now, due to climate change, that polar bears are *drowning* for the first time in history. The open stretches of water between ice floes are too great for them to cross. Arctic Indigenous peoples have said for many years now that the impact of climate change shows up first in the sensitive Arctic, and that its peoples -- human, animal, and plant -- show

us images of the future we all face. The future polar bears show us is one of reduced livable area, reduced food resources, poorer health, population-damaging changes in birth rates and ratios, and increased death rates from a variety of habitat-related causes.

And it's not just polar bears -- or, for that matter, "wildlife." In Churchill alone, fourteen teenaged boys out of a *total* population of only 5,000 individuals committed suicide during the **single month** of March, 2007. Horrifyingly similar statistics are being reported from the towns and villages of Arctic Indigenous peoples in both East and West Hemispheres. As Lori reports and so many of us know, it's because "the collapse of the traditional subsistence culture has left despair and hopelessness among the young." Cultures that still live sustainably with and honor the Earth hold the world's last, best hope of knowledge we can use to save humanity from self-destructing. Yet, the very lack of distance between human and earth that makes such cultures a storehouse of wisdom and ways we all need also makes them vulnerable. What kills the earth, kills them. And as it does, the young people watch with increasing despair as family members die and a whole way of life vanishes -- along with the seals and polar bears and other animals upon which their people have depended for generations.

Thanks to Lori Lambert, Ph.D., for providing us a copy of her work for Enduring Legacies Native Cases Project.

Please visit the project website at <http://www.evergreen.edu/tribal/cases/>