

'They're everywhere': has the decline of the seal hunt saved the polar bear?

Despite vanishing sea ice and shorter winters, Labrador's polar bear population is among the healthiest in the world – and it could be thanks to the harp seals

Greg Mercer in Hamilton Inlet, Labrador

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There are over 2,500 polar bears in the coastal area that includes Labrador and northern Quebec, according to Environment Canada. Photograph: Danita Delmont/Getty Images/Gallo Images

G

uido Rich, 28, an Inuit hunter from Rigolet, Labrador, brings his Ski-Doo to a careful stop on the sea ice, mindful of the precious cargo it hauls: the body of an 800lb male polar bear. It takes Rich and two other men to roll the animal off the sled and on to the ice, while his wife and young children watch.

His sister, Natasha Pottle, who shot the bear the night before, hands her brother the plastic bags used to store liver, hair and fat samples that will be sent away for lab testing. The animal will provide valuable information for Labrador's biologists, a small windfall for his family and meat for the community. Rich has barely begun cutting into the hide when a parade of people from the village start arriving to take pictures, offer observations or just watch respectfully.



"When you get a bear, everyone in town knows it," Rich said.

Scenes like this are being repeated up and down the rugged, remote coast this year. Despite vanishing sea ice and shorter, milder winters, Labrador's polar bear population is actually growing – which means a bigger harvesting quota for Inuit hunters.

There are more than 2,500 polar bears in the vast coastal area that includes Labrador and northern Quebec, according to Environment Canada – far more than was expected earlier in the millennium – and further signs the bears continue to rebound despite the impacts of climate change.

Indeed, although scientists and Inuit sometimes clash over the estimates, the polar bear population of coastal Labrador is among the healthiest in the world.

They jumped on the harp seal boom ... we're seeing them further south than in the past **Jim Goudie**

"When I grew up, a polar bear was kind of this mythical creature because you didn't see them very often. You didn't hear tell of people seeing them," said Jim Goudie, wildlife manager for Nunatsiavut, the regional indigenous self-government.

"This abundance of polar bears is not something my father's generation grew up with. It's only since the mid-80s there's been the boom. Now there's polar bears everywhere."

The reason, biologists suspect, is the boom in the harp seal population. As Newfoundland's seal fishery has collapsed under international pressure, the harp seals of the north-west Atlantic have proliferated. They now number about 7.4 million animals – more than seven times the population in the 1970s.

That has created a veritable feast for Labrador's polar bears, who have shifted their diet from ring seals to their more southerly, promiscuous cousins.

"They jumped on the harp seal boom," Goudie said. "They appear to have adapted for this moment in time ... We're seeing them further south than in the past."

Labrador's Inuit have hunted polar bears for thousands of years. But only recently have they been able to so carefully monitor and protect the population, thanks to a unique, indigenous-run conservation program managed by Nunatsiavut.

The bear shot by Pottle was one of 12 killed by Inuit hunters this season under Nunatsiavut's quota system, which doles out bear hunting licences through a lottery. A hunter has one week to get a bear before the licence expires and is transferred to another person. Only Inuit residents can apply for a licence, and it's illegal to sell a licence to a big game hunter who is not from the region.

In Inuit culture, a polar bear remains a deeply respected animal, called Nanuk in the Inuktitut language, and getting one is still considered the mark of a great hunter. The harvest remains such an important part of local tradition that it has its own statute in Nunatsiavut's land claim with the federal government.

But Pottle isn't putting on any airs. Shooting her first polar bear was a terrifying experience, she said.

"I was scared," she said. "It was intense. We chased the tracks out on to the ice and there he was. Then our Ski-Doo stalled and he started coming toward us. That's when I started calling for my brother."



In Inuit culture, a polar bear remains a deeply respected animal, called Nanuk in the Inuktitut language, and getting one is considered the mark of a great hunter. Photograph: Image Broker / Rex Features

Her brother, carrying the rifle on his back, circled around to keep the animal at a safer distance. Then he handed the gun to Natasha and told her to shoot.

“She was crying, and I said: ‘What’s wrong?’ She said she’s never going polar bear hunting again,” he said. “I said: ‘It’s your licence. You’ve got to shoot it.’”

The bear meat will be divided up and shared among the region’s community freezer program, which provides food for the elderly and others who can’t hunt for themselves. Wasting the meat is prohibited by Nunatsiavut law. Failure to share the meat or submit samples for testing means a hunter can be banned for five years.

“Some people say it’s our right. But I’ve always viewed it as a privilege. We ask a lot of [hunters], but you’re getting something that not every Canadian has the right to go out and do,” said Goudie. “That’s why I think Nunatsiavut leads not only Canada, but also the world, when it comes to conservation management and buy-in to our system.”

Inuit hunters can sell a bear pelt for \$4,000 to \$5,000 to a local taxidermist, who will auction it off to buyers around the world. In previous decades, when the international market for pelts was booming, the same bearskin could fetch as much as \$30,000. Under Nunatsiavut’s program, a computer chip is embedded in the pelt to prove it was harvested through a legal hunt.

Much like the coastal Inuit themselves, the polar bear’s world relies heavily on reliable, vast expanses of sea ice. As the region’s sea ice vanishes because of warming oceans and milder winters, the bear has had to adapt. The animals appear to be thriving, but winter is becoming increasingly unpredictable.

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The loss of sea ice has been dramatic, according to climatologist Robert Way. He points to the Canadian Ice Service historical database, which shows Nunatsiavut’s northern region has lost about a third of its ice cover in the past decade.

Conservationists say the Nunatsiavut model is a lesson for other regions trying to manage their polar bear population. Goudie argues the Inuit, sometimes criticized by animal rights activists for allowing the bear hunt, have a vested interest in preserving the polar bears that live among them.

“For Inuit, it would be like losing an entire piece of their culture,” he said.