



News



Peter Turkstra sets up his tent on the Arctic ice



At Longyearbyen City Center with statue of Longyear



Checking out their tents and gear



Walking into town (Longyearbyen)

Princely predators in peril

Global warming could wipe out the great white bears of the Arctic

**By Paul Legall
The Hamilton Spectator**
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They're the world's biggest land-based meat eaters, the stuff of Inuit legends and iconic creatures in the polar regions.

They're at the top of the food chain with no natural enemies and can sniff out their dinner from a distance of 13 kilometres. They're so well adapted to their Arctic surroundings they often pass as snowdrifts while stalking their prey.

But polar bears, which number about 22,000, have also become the canaries in the mine shaft scientists are using to predict the impact of global warming on the polar regions.

And if the warming trend continues, they say, these princely predators will disappear in 100 years.

But for the time being, they're still at the top of the polar pack. And five area men will be invading their hunting grounds as they drag their sledges over the pack ice to the North Pole this week.

The local trekkers are Paul Hubner, 45, of Stoney Creek, Fred Losani, 41, and Peter Turkstra, 42, of Hamilton, and Steve Stipsits, 43, and Scott Shawyer, 35, of Burlington. An American adventurer is also along.

All successful businessmen, they've used the trip to highlight the problem of child poverty in the city and have raised about half a million dollars in pledges to help the needy. They also forked out about \$20,000 each for the unique adventure. But they don't want a polar bear in their tents to make the experience feel more authentic.

Their leader Doug Stoup, 42, encountered three polar bears during an expedition last year and fired warning shots with a flare gun and Russian assault rifle to scare them off. But even after backing off briefly, one of the animals stalked his crew for several hours over the polar ice.

Stoup assured his teammates, however, they'll probably be too far north to meet any bears this year. He didn't tell them that the paw prints of the



Reuters

A polar bear goes with the floe while dining on a seal. Scientists say the giant carnivores could disappear if global warming continues.

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bears have been seen at the Pole.

In a message left with The Spectator by satellite phone yesterday, Stoup reported the team was still about 74 kilometres from the Pole after slogging about 23 kilometres the first two days.

The challenge is maintaining their progress. They moved about 12 kilometres on their first day, but saw that disappear as the pack ice drifted back the same distance.

Conditions yesterday morning were good, starting sunny and a little warmer than expected, then shifting to high winds and whiteouts with a wind chill of -18 C.

But Stoup said the group is in good spirits. And he posed a question to students following their progress through The Spec's Newspaper in Education program in 101 city classrooms:

How many kilometres are there in a degree of latitude?

See thespec.com to keep track of the team's progress.

Whether or not they encounter bears, the adventurers should learn to appreciate the conditions that are threatening their food supply and survival.

The trekkers will be crossing the sea ice where the animals hunt seals between late April and mid-July. As a result of global warming, however, their dining room is getting smaller each year as the sea ice melts earlier and freezes later. This gives them less time to build up their fat reserves before returning to the land to hibernate.

At lower latitudes, global warming is also causing some creatures such as moose, white-tailed deer, coyotes, cougars, grizzly bears and even robins to move farther north.

Hugh Dale-Harris, 35, who taught school in the Inuit village of Iglulik above the Arctic Circle six years ago, said the native elders and local hunters are keenly aware about how these changes affect their lives.

"Elders talked about the early spring and late freezeup," said Dale-Harris, who was part of a five-man British team that dogsledded from Ellesmere Island to the North Pole last year.

He said experienced hunters had more trouble predicting the weather because of changes in their traditional "indicators" such as the quality and thickness of the ice and snow. This made it harder for them to predict travel conditions and decide whether it was safe to venture out on hunting trips.

Meanwhile, no polar bear sightings have been reported during the first two days of the Stoup expedition.

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