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Vol. 27 | Issue 1

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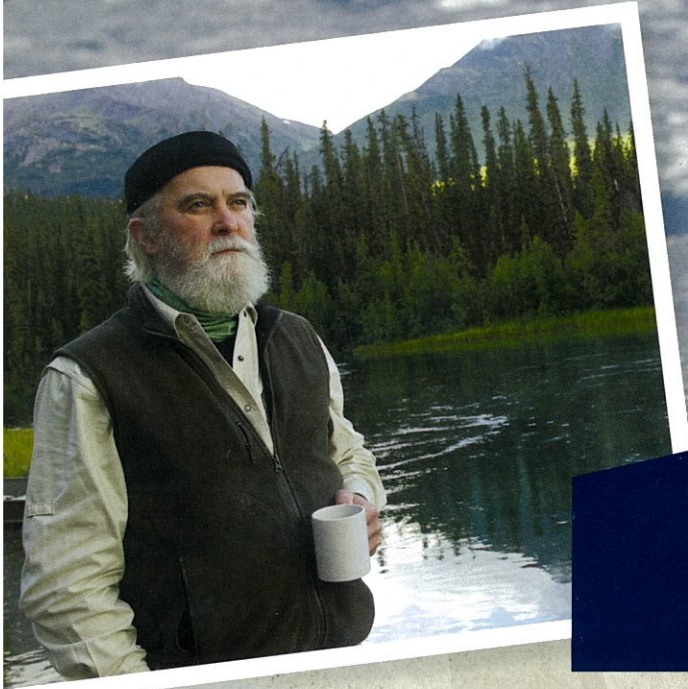
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CONSERVATION MATTERS™

with *Shane Mahoney*



SAGA OF THE WHITE BEAR

Shane Mahoney is considered one of the leading international authorities on wildlife conservation. A rare combination of historian, scientist and philosopher he brings a unique perspective to wildlife issues that has motivated and inspired audiences around the world. Named one of the 10 Most Influential Canadian Conservationists by *Outdoor Canada Magazine* and nominated for *Person of the Year* by *Outdoor Life Magazine*, he has received numerous awards including the *Public Service Award of Excellence* from the government of Newfoundland and Labrador and *International Conservationist of the Year* by *Safari Club International*. Born and raised in Newfoundland he brings to his writings and lectures a profound commitment to rural societies and the sustainable use of natural resources, including wildlife and fish.

The listing in May 2008 of the polar bear as “threatened” by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) has been a highly controversial decision. In the first of a series of articles, Shane Mahoney discusses the special place this inspiring animal has held in human cultures and the complicated scenario that an interface between the climate change debate, wildlife science, and the ESA presents for hunters and the sustainable use of wildlife.

Nearly every late winter season, the island of Newfoundland, my home, is visited by wandering giants. They appear on our ice-brushed coastal margins and snow-squallied headlands, lumbering across the land, indifferent to weather, sea, and man. Throwing their great forepaws inward, they slowly crowd both our imaginations and our lives, reminding us of a time not so long ago when the sight of the great “water bear,” as Newfoundlanders know it, would have sent every man for his rifle and the chance for fresh meat at last. Winters were long and lonely in our communities, and nothing but seals and bears made their way to our frozen shores. The sight of the white beast emerging like some animated ice form from the drifting snows was a fearful and wondrous sight, often encountered at close quarters and at night. When it stood erect at such times, looming skyward in the drifting snow, the experience was overwhelming.

Most times, this was all we had—a fleeting moment of shock and awe. But sometimes the bear came within our grasp, and we took it as best we could. We raced upon it, knowing that if it made the sea our chance was lost. So many times, it succeeded and was transformed from land creature to whale in one smooth immersion in the ice-churned sea. It would emerge on some too-distant ice floe and look back upon us as a god would witness mortals. But there were times when our breathing was not too ragged, when our old guns were faithful, and when the wind and distance did not conspire against us. At these times, it fell as all great beasts do, slowly and



Of perhaps even greater importance has been the polar bear's role in the spiritual lives of these cultures. No other animal has figured so prominently in this regard and, to this day, the polar bear remains irreplaceable to these peoples and their descendants. It is hardly surprising that an animal capable of killing adult walruses and swimming a hundred miles and more in frigid arctic seas should become the greatest of spiritual guardians to the hunting cultures that shared its frozen domain.

There was also the strange humanness of the white bear. Like the people who shared its world, the polar bear pursued the seals, walruses, and small white whales of the Arctic Ocean; at times the females, at least, sought refuge in snow shelters, just as we did. The bear could stand erect, and when skinned, its carcass was too human in appearance to ignore. Lying there on the bloodied snow, it was truly as if a man had emerged as the hide had fallen away. Thus it is not hard to appreciate the Inuit legends that portrayed the bears as humans who donned their hides only when outdoors and visible to people. It was for these same reasons that the hunting and death of a polar bear became of such great significance to the arctic peoples and why so many elaborate rituals developed to appease and thank the great bear when it was finally taken.

This spiritual human/bear relationship was to stand in great contrast to the attitudes of most early European explorers who found their way to the lands of arctic cultures. Seeking fame and the fabled Northwest Passage, these bold adventurers entered a foreign and dangerous world where the polar bear was to be feared and shot at every opportunity. There was

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dreamlike. Once ours, we marveled at its beauty, size, and power and examined its every feature. Admiring the bear as we did, we were wise enough to know we could love it and eat it at the same time.

Newfoundlanders are certainly not alone in their admiration for the world's largest land carnivore. Since it was first described as a distinct species in 1774, the polar bear has been a source of fascination for people everywhere and has come to symbolize the arctic more than any other animal species. Not even the great migratory herds of caribou are equal to the great bear as a symbol of this icy world. Moving alone across the ice pack in search of seals or emerging from a snow den with newborn cubs, the polar bear is an embodiment of the arctic, a creature so finely tuned to its harsh environment that its very solitariness seems to stand as a symbol of hope for the natural world. In its unsurpassed capacity to magically transition from land to sea, *Ursus maritimus*, to use its scientific name, forces us to marvel at the relentless capacity of the natural world to invent and to succeed against improbable odds. Such capacities, we hope, bode well for our future and that of the polar bear itself.

For indigenous peoples, the great white bear has long been an important provider. For the Inuits, the Chukchis, the Russian Pomors, and various other cultures, the polar bear has been a source of meat and fat, of fur and sinew. Humans have hunted the polar bear since our paths first crossed, perhaps 4,000 to 5,000 years ago in Canada, and for much longer periods in other arctic regions of the world.



to be no mythology now, no respectful ritual at death. Only fear, machismo, and greed were to play a part in the animals' demise. Distant from any higher purpose, such killings persisted and gradually increased in scale from the sixteenth century onward, until by the early decades of the twentieth, a commercial harvest of polar bears was well established in parts of northern Eurasia and was emerging in North America as well. Even nanuuk, as the Inuit call the great bear, could become a commodity, it would seem.

While never especially large, these harvests did lead to local population declines and to concerns for the species across its range. Interestingly, these concerns were to culminate in the 1970s in a rare cooperative effort by arctic nations on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Proof that the polar bear could still inspire the human imagination, such efforts led to the International Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears, signed by Canada, Denmark, Norway, the USA, and the Soviet Union in 1973. In addition to endorsing strict controls on polar bear harvests, this agreement also led to an extensive program of international research on polar bears and moved the scientific management of this species to the forefront of

concern. It also banned hunting of polar bears from aircraft and icebreaker watercraft, activities that had slowly been increasing before these multinational discussions were underway.

The International Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears was an unbelievable achievement for its time and laid the foundation for an incredibly successful management system for regional polar bear populations world-wide. As the policy matured, it would see ever-greater involvement by indigenous arctic communities and incorporation of their traditional knowledge in the management plans for this great animal, and sustainable harvests that brought great benefits to the bears and the native cultures themselves. Little did the scientists and policy makers at the time dream that thirty-five years later, their approaches would be radically transformed, confronted by a different world view and the imminent emergence of two conceptual and legislative giants: climate change and the Endangered Species Act. My next article will discuss the profound implications this new reality poses for the polar bear and for hunting itself.

The Guide Outfitters Association of British Columbia (GOABC) wants to start a fundamental shift among hunters from caring about hunting to caring about all wildlife. Ranchers care about cattle and anglers care about fish, but hunters seem to only care about their sport. Hunters must be committed to the responsible use of wildlife resources and passionate about preserving a diversity of wildlife species. The GOABC is a strong supporter of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, which stipulates that law and science should manage wildlife. This model is the result of hunters and anglers who were dedicated to conservation. As anti-hunting pressure becomes louder, it becomes increasingly important to continue and enhance the legacy of the hunter conservationist.

