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WEEK 37: MONTANA

Polar Bear Conservation: Exploring the Arctic Through a Montana Lens

By Daniel J. Cox, Nature Photographer and Director of the Arctic Documentary Project for Polar Bears International, Bozeman, Montana



A polar bear makes its way across broken ice in the Beaufort Sea. (Photo credit: Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com)

One might easily wonder how a person who lives in Montana could have any kind of connection to the Arctic. For me it all began with my birth in the state of Washington, followed by a family move to Minnesota in my early teens. As a young adult, we made a final move to Montana, which has remained my home base ever since. Sometimes I wonder if my parents were doing this on purpose—staying as far north as possible in the continental United States, close to—but never crossing—the northern border. Whether it was accidental or on purpose, I grew up appreciating sparsely populated environments and opportunities to be close to the rugged nature offered by our most northern states.



(L) Barren Ground Caribou (*Rangifer arcticus*) porcupine herd. Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska. (R) Weathered caribou antlers in the Sila River. Northwest Territories (also known as Nunavut), Canada. (Photo credits: Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com)



Porcupine Caribou herd in the foothills of the Brooks Range, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska. (Photo credit: Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com)

Spending my teens and early adult life in Minnesota gave me great appreciation for wild, frigid country. Learning to love nature and animals that lived in cold climates was the beginning of my desire to go even further north, to the tundra-covered plains of Canada and Alaska. The original spark was ignited very early one summer morning when I was about 16 years old. I caught site of a black bear walking across our lawn, on our farm in Twig, Minnesota. There, right in front of me, was an animal that represented all things truly wild. That black bear inspired my first true desire to document animals in the wild. Suddenly, the entire animal kingdom was open to me. My mind connected the black bear to its polar opposite cousin *Ursus maritimus*, the polar bear, the most elusive of the bear family. If I could see a black bear, then why not a polar bear?



Polar bears near Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. (Photo credits: Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com)

As a young man I began pursuing my dream of becoming a photojournalist, one who specialized in telling the stories of animals that could not do it for themselves. For me, sharing their stories through photographs was a way to **help inspire the general public and encourage interest in nature, wildlife, and the wild places needed for all animals to survive.**

It all began with a father who loved photography; he was the one who introduced me to my first interchangeable lens camera at about eight years old. Later—in my teens—the photo bug began to evolve. In the summer of 1976, I bought my first camera with the money my sister and I made from selling an old car we had purchased together. That same summer my family hosted a young man from Japan, Takashi Koyama, and I was convinced this was the time to get a really great deal on a Japanese camera. Before he returned home, I gave him my money and he purchased the model I requested.



Aurora Borealis, also known as Northern Lights, in the sky above Wapusk National Park, Manitoba, Canada. (Photo credit: Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com)

My teens were spent playing sports and shooting photos of my friends. Later I went on to the University of Minnesota of Duluth where I studied Communications and worked to put myself through college at Grandmaison Photographic Studios shooting weddings, assisting on commercial jobs, and doing lots and lots of darkroom work. It was 1979 and I was already living the dream.

It seems quite appropriate that my first published image, a photograph of my father flyfishing in Montana, appeared in *Fly Fisherman* magazine when I was 18 years old. The man who **inspired my love for the outdoors and a passion for photography** was also the model for my first publication.

My career as a photojournalist has been a long and rewarding journey. Over the years, my expeditions have taken me from my home base here in the wilds of Montana to various areas on all seven continents,

shooting everything from Antarctica to the wilds of Africa to the streets of Europe.



Two polar bears wrestling in Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. (Photo credit: Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com)

Many of my trips to the far north have been to Churchill, Manitoba, where I spent decades photographing polar bears on the shores of Hudson Bay. Churchill, located partly within the Arctic Circle, is known as the “Polar Bear Capital of the World.” **It is estimated that there are about 20,000 polar bears left in the world, many of them in the Canadian Arctic.** Each fall between September and November, hundreds of polar bears from the Western Hudson Bay population (estimated at about 900–1000 bears) migrate north and gather near Churchill waiting for the sea ice to form. Once there’s enough ice, they spend the winter there hunting seals.



Tundra buggy and polar bears in Churchill. (Photo credit: Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com)

The fall polar bear event attracts many tourists, who, like me, are keen to interact with nature and see polar bears in their natural habitat. For those who can't travel to the Arctic, a live “**polar bear cam**” offers an opportunity to watch live polar bears.

During my travels to Churchill, I met two very important people in my life that would forever tie me to the Arctic. The first is my wife Tanya, who grew up in Churchill with her family. Tanya's father, Len Smith, is credited for building the first Tundra Buggy, a vehicle that gives tourists the opportunity to **see polar bears up close and personal in a safe and secure environment.**

The second significant person I met in Churchill is Robert Buchanan, past president and CEO of Polar Bears International (PBI). Robert and I became dear friends due to our mutual love of the north, polar bears, and photography. Robert and his wife Carolyn founded PBI in 2002, transforming it from a small organization of polar bear enthusiasts (founded by Dan Guravich as Polar Bears Alive) to a conservation group with worldwide impact. As PBI grew, I convinced Robert to locate the NGO's headquarters to Montana in 2010.

Though it may seem strange to have a group devoted to polar bears headquartered in the Rocky Mountains, it's really not so unusual. **Bozeman, Montana has the highest number of nonprofits per capita of any place in the United States,** and with this comes a pool



of like-minded people who are fueled by passion and willing to work hard—often for little or no pay—to do something good for animals and the environment.

Robert retired in 2013, and another good friend in Bozeman, Krista Wright, replaced him as PBI's leader. My wife Tanya and I have remained very committed to this wonderful group that began as an organization to educate people about polar bears but **eventually morphed into a powerful**

voice for climate change. Polar bears are our hook for getting people's attention to discuss the warming Arctic.



A polar bear mother and cub near Churchill. (Photo credits: Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com)

So it is the Arctic that brought me to Montana in a roundabout way. Through my love of photography and my **dedication to working with polar bears**, I've ended up aligning myself ever more closely with a group that, without the Arctic, would not exist. As mentioned earlier, we even share office space with PBI here in Bozeman, so **I feel closely connected to the Arctic even when I'm here at work in Montana.**

Since my early days with Robert, I've been donating my polar bear and other Arctic multimedia materials to PBI so they can **better educate the public to the plight of all things in the far north.** To take this a step further I created the Arctic Documentary Project (ADP) under the auspice of PBI in 2008.



Through the ADP, my wife Tanya and I, are able to continue documenting the many polar bear stories and scientific research that can best be told through still photographs and videos. These materials are available to PBI and their Arctic Ambassador Center network at no charge, ensuring they as well as scientists conducting research, have

quality materials to support their science and ultimately their message. Zoo exhibits and scientific presentations are two important areas where the multimedia materials we shoot for the ADP have been used again and again.

I'm fortunate to spend time close to nature here in Montana, in the Arctic, and elsewhere in the world, and enjoy sharing this perspective with those who have an interest. I encourage you to **explore the Arctic yourself** and to learn more about polar bears by visiting polarbearsinternational.org and the [Arctic Documentary Project](http://ArcticDocumentaryProject.org).

View the author's extensive collection of polar bear photographs [here](#).

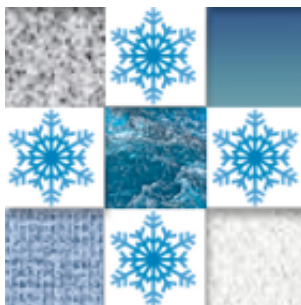
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About the Author: *Daniel J. Cox has been documenting nature for over 35 years. In 2013 he was honored as the Outstanding Nature Photographer of the Year by the North American Nature Photography Association (NANPA). He's also been awarded in competitions worldwide including BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year and Nature's Best. Dan's wide range of accomplishments include being a regular*

contributor to both national and international nature and conservation publications, a field contributor for Outdoor Photographer, a consultant for Hewlett-Packard fine art printers as well as an honorary Nikon Legend Behind the Lens and is now working with Panasonic as a Lumix Luminary team member. His work has been featured in several galleries including Nikon House (New York), National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and the Natural History Museum in London. His most personally satisfying accomplishments include two cover stories for National Geographic magazine and his current volunteer work as director of the Arctic Documentary Project for Polar Bears International. See more of Dan's work at www.naturalexposures.com.

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