

Local veterinarian participates in polar bear release in Manitoba, Canada

Dr. Jocelynn Jacobs, the owner of Countryside Animal Health Center in Midland, participated in a wild polar bear release earlier this month.

She and 20 other veterinarians from across the United States and Canada attended the North American Veterinary Conference's Arctic Expedition to Churchill, Manitoba Canada Oct. 29 through Nov. 3.

She was one of six of the 10 veterinarians from the conference chosen to participate in an actual polar bear release into the wild. They assisted in releasing two polar bears about 30 miles north of Churchill near the Hudson Bay. The polar bears all congregate in Churchill for six weeks in October through November waiting for the ice to freeze on the Hudson Bay. They do this each year at this unique spot since Churchill is located on a plateau of land that sticks out into the Bay and thus the ice freezes here quicker than other spots in the Bay. Once the Bay freezes over the polar bears venture out on the ice looking for seals which are their main source of

"Once you visit and participate in something like this, global warming becomes more of a reality. These bears haven't eaten for about four or five months and won't eat until the ice freezes on the Hudson Bay. If the ice doesn't freeze, they don't get to eat seal and they will die. Even one or two days can make a difference between life and death for the bears — especially the young ones. We were excited to see that even from the day we arrived until the day we left the tundra about a week later, the ice was just starting to form around the perimeter of the Bay. Hopefully it will only be a few more weeks before the bears can venture out and start eating again."

—Dr. Jocelynn Jacobs on global warming

food. They spend the next 5 to 7 months fattening up eating seals.

When the polar bear arrive in Churchill they are very hungry. They have been in a state of walking hibernation. Polar bears are one of few species of bears that do not officially hibernate. Instead they roam the area around the lower section of Hudson Bay and wait for the ice to form to go back out to hunt seals again. They stop eating in July when they

move back on land and they don't eat again until the ice freezes in mid to late November. They take a lot of short naps during the day to conserve energy and sometimes munching on seaweed or scavenge for dead carcasses.

Because the animals all congregate in Churchill and wait until the ice freezes, Churchill can be a dangerous place for people during this time. Many polar bears will wander into town and because

they are the only "true" human predator, people must be very careful. There are signs all over town that read "STOP! Polar Bears! Do Not Walk In This Area."

In Churchill there are about 900 residents, and during the peak polar bear viewing times, about 12,000 tourists come into the town. Tourism is their major source of income and the townsfolk need to keep



Photo provided
Dr. Jocelynn Jacobs submitted this photo of a helicopter preparing to drop two tranquilized polar bears in the wild.

RELEASE: Local vet helps polar bears

things safe. Throughout the night, community members patrol the outer area of the town to scare off polar bears from coming into town during these peak weeks.

If a polar bear refuses to be scared off and continues to come into town while waiting for the ice to freeze on the bay, the community will catch the polar bear in a large metal tube-like cage. The bears go to a "polar bear jail" just outside of Churchill. This is an old military building that has been set up to hold 23 polar bears in large cages until they are carried by helicopter out back into the tundra many miles away from Churchill. All the polar bears caught are tagged and documented so they know if certain polar bears are repeat offenders.

The release of the polar bears took place on Saturday, Oct. 31. The bears



were tranquilized then carefully placed the bears in heavy duty nets. A helicopter gently raised them from a cable for transfer. A bear was then transferred to an area 30 miles outside of Churchill. A second was placed a mile or two away. The bears quickly woke up from their sedation after plac-

ing them in the tundra. The bears are marked with a green material so that local Inuit Eskimos would know that they had been tranquilized within the last 45 days and not to hunt them. Once the polar bears go out on the ice and water, the mark quickly disappears.

Jacobs was asked to par-



Above, Dr. Jocelynn Jacobs submitted this photo of polar bears near Churchill, Manitoba Canada. At left, Dr. Jacobs.

ticipate in the conference because of her expertise in sled dogs and sled dog nutrition. She gave lec-

tures and input on sled dog to the other veterinarians. She will also be participating as an Iditarod veteri-

narian in March 2010. She has been raising, showing and sled racing her 19 sled dogs for the last 20 years.