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The Good News Bears

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RESOLUTE BAY, Nunavut

The polar bear has become the new poster animal for environmentalists, and I can understand why. When it comes to "charismatic megafauna" - the term used by marketing experts at conservation groups - the bear is a giant improvement over the giant panda.

The rotund panda may be cuddlier, but it is really more of a poster animal for gluttony and sloth. In the wild, it eats 12 hours a day and spends the rest of the time sleeping or hiding. In captivity, it can barely stir itself even to mate - Mei Xiang had to be artificially inseminated to produce her new cub at the National Zoo.

Yes, Mei Xiang can draw crowds to the zoo, but does her lolling inspire much zeal for preserving the species? The message she sends is, "I don't care, so why should you?"

Polar bears are mammals with a mission, whether it's Gus obsessively swimming in the Central Park Zoo, or the mother and her cub that I once followed during a dogsled expedition here in the Canadian high Arctic. We watched her with awe and kept our distance, especially after coming across the bloody remnants of her seal dinner on the ice. The message I took home was: "You mess with my habitat, and I'll mess with you."

Besides their natural charisma, the bears have another crucial asset for a poster animal: location. Because the Arctic is projected to feel the effects of global warming sooner and more severely than temperate regions, the recent shrinking of sea ice in the Arctic has been promoted as a grim harbinger for the planet.

The polar bear has become, in the words of the WWF conservation group, "an ambassador for Arctic nature and a symbol of the impacts that global warming is increasingly having around the world." Conservation groups and scientists have been making headlines in the past year, warning that shrinking sea ice could make wild bears extinct by the end of the century, possibly within just 20 years.

Right now, though, Inuits like Nathaniel Kalluk here in Resolute Bay aren't exactly worried. "There are a lot more bears now than before," said Mr. Kalluk, who is 51 and has been hunting since childhood. "We'll spot 20 to 30 bears on a hunting trip. Twenty years ago, sometimes we didn't see any at all."

This is not an isolated trend. Although the bears seem to be hurting in some places, like the Hudson Bay region south of here, their numbers have increased worldwide. In Canada, home to most of the world's polar bears, the population has risen by more than 20 percent in the past decade.

The chief reason for the rise is probably restrictions on hunting (for which conservationists deserve credit). In this village of fewer than 200 residents, Mr. Kalluk and the other hunters are limited each year to three dozen bears, which they allocate by drawing names out of a hat.

But the increase might also be related to the recent warming, which could be helping bears in some places. After all, the bears have thrived in warmer climates than today's. In the 1930's, the Arctic was as warm as it is now, and in the distant past it was even warmer.

The doomsday reports of the melting Arctic have focused on the rise in temperatures

compared with the late 1970's, but that was a particularly cold period. So the bears can cope with some global warming, which would increase the diversity of species in the Arctic - and maybe the number of humans, too.

Today only 30,000 people live in Nunavut, an impoverished Canadian territory the size of Western Europe. Ecotourism during the summer is one of the few promising industries in places like Resolute, but the cold and ice keep out all but a few affluent adventurer travelers, scientists and journalists.

Personally, I like the high Arctic just as frozen and empty as it is now. But I can see why Mr. Kalluk doesn't mind the idea of a little climate change.

"The ice is always going to freeze in the winter," he said, "but it would be better for us if we had a longer summer. We'd have more time to use our boats. There would be more jobs and a longer tourist season." The bears would be still around, and their charisma would be making more money for the locals, not just for the WWF fund-raisers down south.