



Meet the ‘polar bear guy’ who got shout-out from Obama

Robin Bravender, E&E reporter
Thursday, January 2, 2014



Frostpaw the polar bear spent the holidays protesting the Keystone XL pipeline near the Obamas’ vacation home in Hawaii. Photo courtesy of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Frostpaw, a dress-up polar bear who has stalked President Obama for months, finally got his presidential shout-out.

“Hey, polar bear.”

Obama’s nonchalant greeting outside a Hawaii golf course last week was hailed as a big victory by Frostpaw and his creators

at the Center for Biological Diversity. Staff and volunteers for the environmental group have been donning the costume and following Obama to vacation spots and fundraisers around the country.

Their goal: draw his attention to the fluffy bear and to their cause opposing the controversial Keystone XL pipeline.

“We got lucky,” said Bill Snape, 49, CBD’s senior counsel who spent days in the bear costume tracking Obama during the first family’s vacation to Hawaii.

Snape got a tip that the president was going golfing at the Mid-Pacific Country Club in Kailua, Oahu, so he and an activist from the University of Hawaii parked themselves at a chain-link fence near the 18th hole where a small crowd had gathered. Snape waited for two “painfully long, hot hours” for Obama and his entourage to appear. Obama was golfing in shorts on the warm day, and it got toasty inside the furry costume.

“I must have lost 10 pounds of water during that, but sure enough, there he comes,” Snape said. “So he makes his putt, I start clapping and waving at him, real respectfully, and that’s when he said, ‘Hey, polar bear,’ and the rest was history.”

Snape said he’s certain that Obama saw his sign, where the word “Keystone” was written out with a red slash through it. “It was impossible to miss. To see me, you had to see the sign.” The White

House pool report from the golf outing, however, said it was unclear whether the president noticed the anti-Keystone message.

After that, Frostpaw became a minor celebrity on the island, Snape said. “Oahu was abuzz. I was walking around Christmas Day with the Frostpaw outfit on and without my head and people were like, ‘Hey, it’s the polar bear guy.’”

Obama may have noticed the same polar bear across the court from him earlier last week when Frostpaw followed him to the Oregon State versus University of Akron basketball game in Honolulu. Obama’s brother-in-law is the head coach of the Oregon State Beavers. Snape attended in full polar bear attire, accompanied by a volunteer holding a sign saying: “Beavers Hate Pipelines.”

During a second-half timeout, Snape hoped that starting a dance party would grab Obama’s attention.

“I just started to dance as hard as I could dance,” he said. “I was dancing so hard at one point that the middle part of my costume came a little undone, that was how crazy I was dancing.” He said about 100 people joined him at one point.

Snape declined to say where he learned his moves. “Anyone I attribute that to is going to be just mortified, so Frostpaw learned it on his own,” he said.

He also tried to approach the president on the private beach where the first family was vacationing.

Holding a boogie board, Snape (dressed as Frostpaw) approached two men standing guard on the shore -- one of whom appeared to be holding a gun in a video posted online by CBD.

“I was wondering whether the president wanted to boogie board with me,” Snape told the two guards. They laughed and appeared amused by the attempt. “I don’t think so. Not today,” one of them told Snape.

From Martha’s Vineyard to Oahu

The Hawaii trip was the latest of many attempts to get Frostpaw some face time with the president.

The costume made its debut in 2009 at the U.N. climate change conference in Copenhagen, Denmark. It weighs roughly 10 pounds and is made out of cotton or polyester with no real animal parts. The environmental group has two copies of the outfit -- an “East Coast Frostpaw” and a “West Coast Frostpaw.” They’re careful to only use one at a time, though.



Frostpaw’s alter ego Bill Snape is a senior attorney at CBD’s Washington, D.C.-based office. Photo courtesy Bill Snape.

Frostpaw doesn't technically have a gender, but it's been a topic of debate among CBD's staff. "Let's just say a little bit of David Bowie, a little bit of Prince, a little bit of something else," Snape said. "I think its gender is nebulous."

Snape isn't the character's only alter ego, nor is he the only one who's stalked Obama.

Frostpaw first followed the president in August 2013 during the first family's summer vacation to Martha's Vineyard. Jerry Karnas, CBD population campaign director, dressed up as the polar bear and tried to position himself in view of the president's motorcade.

The polar bear has also made appearances at presidential fundraisers and other events in Miami, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

And Snape and others donned the costume during a weeklong "vigil" outside the White House over last year's Thanksgiving holiday, where tourists were invited to take photos of themselves with a cut-out replica of Obama and the polar bear.

CBD is known for finding unusual ways to draw attention to its efforts to protect endangered species. For example, it started distributing endangered species condoms in 2009, with racy sayings on the packages, like "Hump smarter, save the snail darter," and "Wrap with care, save the polar bear."

With its anti-Keystone campaign, CBD is one of many environmental groups opposing the proposed pipeline, which aims to connect oil sands deposits in Alberta to Gulf Coast refineries.

Greens say the pipeline would increase development of the carbon-heavy oil sands, making it tougher to combat climate change. Backers of the pipeline say it would create jobs and boost domestic energy production.

The White House has said review of the \$5.4 billion project is nearing completion, but it remains unclear when Obama will make a decision.

And as Obama mulls it over, some critics of the plan hope Frostpaw the polar bear will have an impact.

"If we continue to extract fossil fuels and burn them, the Arctic's going to melt and the polar bear is going to go extinct," Snape said. "The polar bear is an iconic way to get people's attention and have them think about climate change in a real but slightly different way."

And while the presidential shout-out was a start, Snape and his colleagues are hoping for more.

"Hopefully, we can even shake the president's hand," Snape said. "That's the ultimate goal here, is to actually have the leader of the Arctic meet the leader of the United States."