

Assiniboine Park Zoo involved in abandoned polar bear rescue, and research to learn about each bear's personality!

Have you visited the Journey to Churchill exhibit at Assiniboine Park Zoo? Did you know that the polar bears there were once orphaned cubs?

Our friends in Winnipeg, Manitoba have been involved in an ongoing polar bear rescue effort. It's the oldest zoo in Canada, located in Assiniboine Park and sitting on about 80 acres.

In 2018 the Assiniboine Park Conservancy—a not for profit arm of the park and zoo—worked hard to raise private dollars to fund a redevelopment of the zoo. They created a strategic plan that included the Journey to Churchill development, which provides an interactive “gateway to the arctic”—educating on arctic species such as snowy owls, arctic foxes, muskox, reindeer, harbour seals, and of course, polar bears. It is the most comprehensive northern species exhibit of its kind, boasting naturalistic landscapes, animal viewing areas, and interactive displays that teach guests about climate change and its impact on animals of the arctic. It's also home to the Leatherdale International Polar Bear Conservation Centre, a 10-acre hub for wildlife education, research, and conservation.

The facility is currently home to nine bears who were once cubs found alone in the wild with no chance of survival. Mother bears sometimes die of naturally occurring circumstances, or they are killed in a human-bear conflict. This happens in the Northern part of the province, especially in autumn when polar bears are on the move. Churchill Manitoba is part of their migratory route, so human-bear conflict is common.

When a bear cub is thought to be orphaned, wildlife officials will wait and watch from a distance for a few days to make sure the mother is not around. Then, the polar bear rescue care team will travel up north, assess the cub's health, and bring him/her home to the Leatherdale Institute to begin a quality life in human care.

The polar bear program allows for extensive research and education on polar bears. It aids animal care teams in knowing how to best care for their bears, while uncovering important findings to help this vulnerable species thrive in their natural habitat. Research includes genetic work, using thermal imagery to understand energetics, and answering fundamental questions such as: where do polar bears den in Canada?

One of the more recent research studies at the Centre is concerned with identifying individual polar bear personalities.

Animals all have unique and diverse temperaments, and from a scientific perspective, this is only recently being recognized. The Leatherdale Research Centre has created a “big five” personality model quiz (that includes measurements for: conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, extroversion). Animal keepers and care professionals—those who work with the bears every day—answer these questions each year as the bears grow and mature. The data is still being studied, but it could have a big impact on polar bears in human care and those in the wild.

If anything, it gives polar bears at the zoo a better quality of life. Incorporating this data into care processes ensures that bears are happy. One female bear, Star, who scores particularly low in extroversion, was moved to a new habitat. Her behaviour signifies that she is faring better and is more at ease without other bears around.

How can this help in the wider context of conservation? Researchers hope that findings will aid in management of polar bears in the wild. Decreasing the likelihood of human-bear conflict would be a good start. There are communities in the north who are dealing with polar bears all the time. In Churchill, the infrastructure is in place to deal with human-bear interactions, but many more rural communities are not so lucky. These tools could provide a better sense of which bears should be moved away from communities faster, and which bears are more agreeable, and could be left alone.

Assiniboine Park Zoo's approach to conservation has an incredibly solid research component. They're interested in the research that drives conservation, particularly about polar bear survivability in the face of climate change. CAZA is proud of the important conservation work, led by Dr. Stephen Peterson, happening there, and look forward to learning where their research takes them.

You can visit Assiniboine Park Zoo in Winnipeg Manitoba, or find them online at:
<https://www.assiniboinepark.ca>

