

WAT'CHEE EXPEDITIONS

POLAR BEAR SAFETY PROGRAM



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Polar Bear Safety Plan

JULY 2010

PREFACE

Wat'Chee Expeditions is owned and operated by Michael Ralph Spence, Administrative Manager and Morris Douglas Spence, Operations Manager. The Head Office is at Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. Field operations are expedited from a base camp at Wat'Chee Lodge.

This Plan has been developed by Wat'Chee Expeditions to ensure the safety of it's employees and guests while living and travelling in areas populated by polar bears and other wild life-forms endemic to sub-arctic ecosystems.

The safety precautions described in the Plan pertain to encounters with all forms of wildlife including those listed in the "Environmental Setting" section.

Commitment to Environmental Protection

Wat'Chee Expeditions supports the need to protect the health and integrity of the ecosystems of the Churchill Wildlife Management Area (CWMA), Wapusk National Park of Canada (Wapusk) and adjacent crown lands. This goal can be achieved with the full commitment of Wat'Chee Expeditions employees and by integrating environmentally responsible practices into its business operations, thereby:

- Preventing, reducing or minimizing adverse impacts including pollution of the environment, and enhancing positive impacts;
- Meeting regulatory requirements;
- Utilizing the knowledge of other Wapusk and CWMA users including Traditional Knowledge;
- Reviewing the Polar Bear Safety Plan annually to ensure improvements in human/wildlife safety procedures and environmental protection performance;
- Documenting and reporting wildlife observations and human activities to ensure the health and integrity of ecosystems.

Introduction to the Safety Plan

The Plan has been prepared to provide information relevant to activities during excursions into polar bear country. It includes information about:

- Communication
- Polar bear/human safety
- Emergency measures in the event of human injury
- Polar bear monitoring teams and equipment
- Managing polar bear encounters
- Detection procedures
- Deterrence procedures
- Denning area safety procedures
- Entering the denning area in Wapusk and CWMA
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- Recording wildlife sightings and incidents

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1.0 WAT'CHEE EXPEDITIONS

Prior to and since the establishment of Wapusk National Park (Wapusk) in 1996, guided oversnow vehicle tours have occurred in Wapusk from a permanent lodge (located outside the park). Wat'Chee Lodge is located five kilometers west of the Wapusk western boundary, and ten kilometers east of Chesnaye, a siding on the Hudson Bay Railway line, in the adjacent Churchill Wildlife Management Area (CWMA). An annual Wildlife Management Area Use Permit is issued by Manitoba Conservation for the Lodge and travel by tracked oversnow vehicles in the CWMA. Each year from mid-February to March 31st, the Lodge is occupied by up to 18 guests and eight staff members. While staying at the Lodge, guests take daily excursions in multi-passenger tracked oversnow vehicles and single passenger snow machines to view and photograph wildlife. Polar bears with cubs are of particular interest. Annually, 30% to 50% of daily expeditions enter Wapusk. The operation is supported by scheduled VIA Rail trains and tracked oversnow vehicles.

2.0 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

“Wat’Chee” A hill with trees

- Wat’CHee Expeditions operations take place in the Hudson Plains Terrestrial Ecozone and more specifically, the Coastal Hudson Bay Lowland Ecoregion. The Ecoregion extends from a few kilometers north of Churchill to James Bay in a band along the Hudson Bay Coast.
- The Ecoregion is a low-lying, marshy coastal plain with extensive tidal flats, developed on flat-lying Palaeozoic limestone bedrock. Post-glacial limits of marine inundation are 120-180 m asl. North of the Nelson River beaches are less prominent than in the eastern portion of the Ecoregion. The terrain is dominated by fens, polygonal peat plateaus, and peat plateaus. Peat plateaus occur often in parrallel rows marking the underlying beaches. In the fens, small incipient palsa bogs are common. Wetlands are poorly drained. Permafrost with low to high ice content is widespread.
- The Ecoregion is within the High Subarctic Ecoclimatic Region. The mean winter temperature is -19 C with 400 mm to 600 mm mean annual precipitation. Snowfall averages about 20 cm during each of the months of January through April. Blowing or drifting snow and high windchill factors will inevitably preclude outdoor activities. On average, one third of winter weather observations attribute reduced visibility to blowing snow.

- Vegetation is characterized by very open stands of stunted black spruce and tamarack with secondary quantities of white spruce; a shrub layer of dwarf birch, willow or ericaceous shrubs; and ground cover of cotton grass or lichen and moss. Poorly drained sites usually support tussock vegetation of sedge, cottongrass and sphagnum moss. Low shrub tundra vegetation consisting of dwarf birch and willow is also common.
- Taiga is the transition between Tundra and Boreal Forest ecosystems. It is characterized by assemblages of plant species and other life-forms common to both.
- The presence of avian and mammalian life-forms is dependent upon the availability of habitats and temperature. Species diversity and population numbers can vary annually.
- At least 133 species of swimming birds, shorebirds, raptors, and scavengers frequent offshore, inshore, intertidal, or salt marsh habitats of the Ecoregion. Of this number the following may be sighted during winter months: ptarmigan, snowy owl, gyrfalcon, common eider and common raven.
- Unlike avian species, mammals do not migrate to warmer climates although some species may migrate between Ecoregions. They adapt to the rigours of winter by exercising different options:
 - Hibernation – Arctic ground squirrel, Least chipmunk, Grizzly bear, Black bear

- Denning – Grizzly bear, Polar bear, Black bear, Wolverine, Red squirrel, Northern flying squirrel, Porcupine, Striped skunk
- Active Under Snow – Masked Shrew, Northern red-backed mouse, Meadow vole, Brown lemming, Collared lemming, Labrador collared lemming, Ermine, Water shrew, Arctic shrew, Pygmy shrew, Deer mouse, Gapper's red backed mouse, Heather vole, Rock vole, Yellow-cheeked vole, Northern bog lemming, Least weasel
- Surface Dwelling – Arctic hare, Snowshoe hare, Gray wolf, Red fox, Arctic fox, Polar bear, Polar bear/Grizzly bear (hybrid), Caribou, Moose, Marten, Fisher, Mink, Lynx

3.0 COMMUNICATION

3.1 Verbal Communication

Miscommunication can have dangerous consequences. Incorrectly reporting human health symptoms may result in unnecessary suffering and expensive emergency measures. Misunderstanding or providing inaccurate information regarding polar bear or other wildlife detection or deterrence, can put guests and employees at risk. Killing any form of wildlife due to a misunderstood or poorly related message is not acceptable.

In the presence of guests, a high degree of professionalism is expected in conversations between employees. Swearing and ill-mannered behaviour reflects poorly on both management and staff.

There is a great deal of published information about polar bears that could be provided at the Lodge. *Local and traditional knowledge is of greatest interest to guests*

3.2 Communication Systems and Emergency Contacts

Wat'Chee Expeditions utilizes three communications systems:

- satellite phones (portable long range)
- two way radios (portable short range)
- mobile radios (fixed vehicle units)

MTS fleetnet phone (204)783-0903

Lodge Phone Tone 714171

These systems provide 24 hour access between the Lodge, expedition vehicles, Churchill and emergency services including:

Wat'Chee Expeditions, Churchill – (204)675-2006

Parks Canada, Churchill – (204)675-8863

R.C.M.P., Churchill – (204)675-8821

Hudson Bay Helicopters, Churchill - (204)675-2576

Custom Helicopters, Thompson – (204)677-3720

Health Centre, Churchill – (204)675-8881

Health Centre, Gillam – (204)652-2600

Health Sciences Centre, Winnipeg – (204)787-3160

Radios are monitored on an ongoing basis at the Lodge.

Regular scheduled (3) daily calls are made to Wat'Chee Expedition's administrative office in Churchill.

3.3 Wat'Chee Expeditions Website

www.watchee.com includes the following information:

- lodge location
- history
- dates of operation

- available services
- news and events
- photo gallery
- general safety information
- contact co-ordinates

4.0 EMERGENCY MEASURES – HUMAN INJURY

In the history of Wat'Chee Expeditions, there has never been a wildlife/human encounter resulting in injury to guests, employees or polar bears. There has never been a wildlife/human encounter resulting in a warning shot being fired to deter an animal or an animal killed.

Management and staff must acquire certification and annual recertification in a first responders course approved by Wat'Chee Expeditions and Parks Canada.

Circumstances vary with each incident that may potentially result in human injury. In a polar bear attack the objective is to stop the encounter to prevent further injury to the victim. The following describes the appropriate actions and the order in which to execute them:

- 1. Stop the encounter. It may be necessary to kill the bear. Extreme caution must be taken to prevent further injury to the victim.***
- 2. Ensure that there are no other bears near the victim.***
- 3. Administer First Aid.***
- 4. Call for assistance and determine the best way to evacuate the victim. Depending on the severity of the injuries, helicopter evacuation may be necessary. If injuries appear to be life threatening, request a medical team to accompany the helicopter.***

5. *The Lodge will be monitoring the radio and will assist in initiating emergency actions. The Lodge will report the incident to the Wat'Chee Expeditions office in Churchill and Parks Canada.*
6. *A group supervisor should be designated from other expedition participants and/or employees. Other guests should be kept well away from the site of the incident and the helicopter landing site and taken back to the Lodge after the victim has been evacuated.*
7. *Everyone must remain vigilant for other polar bears in the vicinity.*
8. *In the event of a fatality, the R.C.M.P. will be notified immediately. The site will be secured and turned over to the R.C.M.P. upon their arrival.*

5.0 POLAR BEAR MONITORING TEAM AND EQUIPMENT

The Monitoring Team will consist of a Team Leader and one or more Crew member(s). Their responsibility is to ensure pre-determined travel and viewing areas are safe to occupy prior to Guides and clients arrival. To avoid confusion in potentially hazardous situations clear lines of communication, within the team are essential.

Team Leader responsibilities:

- Crew training
- equipment availability and maintenance
- comprehensive site assessments in consultation with other monitoring team members
- appropriate actions are taken to either secure the area or recommend an alternate plan for incoming guides and clients
- continuous communications with the Monitoring Team and Guides
- polar bear detection and deterrence

Team Member(s) responsibilities:

- assist as directed by the team leader

Equipment (*mandatory minimum for the team*)

- 12 guage shotgun with cracker shells
- 12 guage shotgun with slugs

- two way and mobile radios and satellite phone
- high powered rifle

6.0 MANAGING POLAR BEAR ENCOUNTERS

Monitoring includes both detection and deterrence of bears.

Detection is the activity of searching for polar bears at sites occupied by people engaging in activities related to Wat'Chee Expeditions excursions (in the denning area, at outcamps and at Wat'Chee Lodge.) and the constant vigilance by a polar bear Monitor. Detection includes obtaining information regarding the location of polar bears in the area before expeditions begin and enroute back to the lodge. Guides with the appropriate training will undertake this activity.

Deterrence is the action taken by the polar bear Monitoring Team to prevent a bear from approaching a client under any circumstances. In the event of a potential threat, the initial response by the Monitoring Team should be to move the individual or group to a safe location.

Lethal action may be required when deterrent devices fail to move the bear off and the person or group cannot be immediately moved to a safe location.

7.0 DETECTION PROCEDURES

7.1 Wat'Chee Lodge– Although bears have never been sighted near the lodge, constant vigilance is none-the-less important.

7.2 Inbound Excursions– Bear sightings will be communicated to all guides and the Lodge. An “all clear” message to excursion groups and the Lodge will be sent, when the area in the vicinity of the Lodge is secure.

7.3 Bear Encounter– In the event of a bear sighting in close proximity to the Lodge, deterrence procedures outlined in Section 8.0 will be followed.

8.0 DETERRENCE PROCEDURES

Bear encounters can result in the animal moving away of it's own volition or as a result of the Monitoring Team taking actions that provoke a flight response. For example, pyrotechnics discharged from a shotgun or pistol can force a bear to move in a desired direction.

Polar bears may become habituated to scaring devices particularly when an attractant (for example discarded food) persists. The obvious solution is to determine what the attraction to a site is and remove it. The option (lethal action) is not acceptable in this case.

All bears will be considered a threat under any circumstances. The Monitoring Team will be consistent in their assessment of every encounter by considering a threat to be present and aggressive behaviour possible.

The Monitoring Team Leader will review actions to be taken in example scenarios, in the denning area and at the Lodge before the first excursion of the season.

Scenarios will include key verbal signals, firearms safety and debriefing after an incident, whether only deterrents were needed or lethal action was taken.

9.0 DENNING AREA SAFETY PROCEDURES

9.1 Excursion Planning

The safety and health of employees and guests is the priority. Excursion planning, into Wapusk or the CWMA will be done the evening before the trip. The Administration/Operations Manager, or a designate will deliver an oral presentation providing the following information:

1. Monitoring Team structure and functions;
2. Guides and their responsibilities ;
3. Deterrence procedures;
4. Safety Rules posted in the lodge;
5. Emergency procedures in the event of injury.

Non-compliance by guests with Wat'Chee Expeditions safety procedures becomes a liability to everyone present. Non-compliance will result in removal of the person to a safe location or to the lodge. Further action may be taken in the interest of the safety of staff and guests.

9.2 Entering the Denning Area in Wapusk and the CWMA

1. A monitoring team will enter a pre-determined area of interest in advance of the guided group of clients to locate an active den or family group.
2. An assessment will be made to determine:
 - bear behaviour
 - potential escape routes for the bears
 - safe locations for guests to retreat to
 - travel conditions to the location to avoid vehicles getting stranded
3. The monitoring team will relay their recommendation to the guided group. A GPS location will be provided if the site is acceptable.
4. Upon arrival at the site the group is directed to a secure area for set up. A safe zone is delineated with a “line in the snow”. The line represents the limit of approach to bears by guests.
5. Guides will be attentive to the behaviour of the bears being observed. Constant surveillance of the surrounding landscape is essential to detect life-forms that may be of interest to clients (eg. caribou) and to detect other bears that may pose a threat.

9.3 Departing the site

Either the client group or the bears will desire to leave the area. The clients to experience another adventure and the bears for privacy.

1. The client group will prepare to leave while their Guides monitor the bears.
2. The Monitoring Team will delay their departure until the client group and their Guides are a safe distance from the site.

10.0 WILDLIFE SITINGS

10.1 Recording Wildlife Sitings

Wat'Chee employees will be supplied with a pocket sized notepad to record information while in the field. A master form will be at the Lodge. Daily sitings will be recorded on the master form at the end of each day. The information will be included in a report to Parks Canada and Manitoba Conservation.

The basic information required when recording wildlife sitings is:

1. **What** did you see and how many. If it was a polar bear family group record the number of cubs;
2. **Where** did you see it (a GPS location is preferred or a location relative to a commonly known, natural or man-made feature);
3. **When** did you see it (day/month/year/& time);
4. **Number** of people present;
5. **Reaction** of wildlife to your presence;
6. **Action** taken by the observer(s):
 - a) Continued to observe/photograph/film until the bird(s) or animal(s) was/were out of site;
 - b) Continued on course, past the location of the siting;
 - c) Changed direction and retreated from the area.

10.2 Incident Reporting

In the event that deterrence actions are required, a separate “Polar Bear Deterrence Incident Report” will be completed by the Monitor/Crew/Guide involved in the episode.

The report consists of the same information recorded for a wildlife siting with some additional detail:

1. ***What***
2. ***Where***
3. ***When***
4. ***Number***
5. ***Why*** was deterrence necessary. There may be an obvious reason for a bear’s approach. For example: *“We stopped for lunch and were eating it outside the van when I noticed a polar bear approaching from a downwind direction. I assume it was attracted by the smell of food or curious about the activity”.*
6. ***How*** was the deterrence action carried out and what was the outcome.