

Editorial

Bad Journalism

The polar bear alongside the boat makes a low chuffing sound. He dives to escape us. Each time he surfaces, he moves farther into open water, farther from land. A few passengers ask our guide, Wally, if we're stressing the bear. I don't hear his answer. I'm too busy kneeling low on the deck with my Canon. I stretch out one hand. The bear swims just beneath it, and he's magnificent.

What little I know about polar bears I've learned through the media. Polar bears can swim more than 60 miles without rest, but they also can drown. This time of year (August), they are usually fasting, conserving calories until the ice forms and allows them to hunt seals again. Climate change means that the ice melts sooner in the spring and freezes later in the winter. Only after I've clicked off about 100 images does it occur to me that Wally might be chasing this bear because of me. I'm with a travel magazine. I'm worse than global warming. I'm a journalist.

Immediately after I take my seat, Wally tries to herd the bear back toward shore, using the boat like a cattle dog on a ranch. But the bear is labored and confused and only wants to get away from us. There's no land in sight. We leave him adrift in Hudson Bay.

Guilt's a heavy souvenir, and I take it home with me. Every time I look at the images from Churchill, Manitoba, I get a sick feeling. The only thing that would make me feel better is to know that my bear made it home, too. But I don't get to know that. I get to live with the knowledge that my overexuberance might have cost this bear his life or, at the very least, pissed him off.

It's been five months since that trip. I



A polar bear swimming in Hudson Bay, Manitoba

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write up this editorial and show it to my assistant editor. She has lots of questions. Aren't there laws against a

guide bringing tourists that close to a polar bear? Shouldn't Wally be reported? How can tourists find reputable guides for similar trips?

I e-mail Wally, expressing my concern—as I should have on his boat last summer. His response makes me feel better (see entire letter posted on our website at womensadventuremagazine.com). First of all, Wally loves polar bears and is heavily involved with the researchers and the Manitoba conservationists who track the bears' health and well-being. Polar bears living in estuaries (such as the Seal River off Hudson Bay) continue to eat throughout the summer because seals and beluga whales remain plentiful and easy for the bears to hunt from large boulders and tidal pools. They don't need the ice to land their prey. These polar bears,

Wally writes, "contrary to international media reports, are not in dire straits." Researchers from the Canadian Wildlife Service have spotted bears for days at a time more than 30 miles offshore. The guideline for tour boats, which Wally helped set, is a maximum of 10 passes on each side. And he maintains that the bears are not scared of people at all. They are curious and, because of their frequent visits to town, they're apt to land in the famous Churchill Polar Bear Jail. It takes cracker shells or bird bombs to keep them out of trouble.

I'm guessing that my bear made it home, but I still feel like an intruder at best. The bear did not seek me out. And when he tried to get away, I chased him. It may have been legal—a common practice even—and may have caused no harm to the bear, but it crossed a line for me. And the photos I carry from that trip will serve as a reminder that just because I *can* do something doesn't mean I should.

-Michelle Theall