

**WHITE BEAR: ENCOUNTERS WITH THE MASTER OF THE ARCTIC ICE.** By CHARLES T. FEAZEL. New York: Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1990. 240 p., 29 black and white photos, 1 line map, end notes, selected bib., index. Hardbound. US\$19.95.

Huge white bears (the largest extant non-aquatic predator) reign supreme over a land that is not land at all. Beauty, mystery, suspense, respect and fear combine to make the polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*) the universal symbol of the Arctic. Perhaps, like no other wild creature, the polar bear has captured our imaginations. In response, there recently has been a steady stream of books about polar bears.

*White Bear* is the latest to appear. Author Charles Feazel apparently became interested in bears when he spent time in the North working as a geologist and encountered bears and bear tales. *White Bear*, the product mostly of interviews and literature review, is a mixture of anecdotes, legend, lore and quotations from scientists and managers, interspersed with a few of Feazel's direct observations. In 13 short chapters *White Bear* introduces the reader to polar bears and polar bear habitats, describes polar bear evolution and the histories of the aboriginal peoples of the Arctic, and describes recent and future changes in the Arctic and how those changes may affect polar bears. It is well written, and although subjects seem scattered at times, chapters are woven together well enough that, in the end, it is a story.

Unfortunately, *White Bear* has several problems. I object most to the thread of fear the author weaves through the book. As the following examples point out, the author cultivates a notion that polar bears are, above all, to be feared: "Yesterday I watched a bear kill a seal. I shouldn't have. Like the strength-sapping cold, the memory seeps inward, displacing all focus on my scientific mission" (p. 2). "In warmer climes I've been in the water with sharks. I fear the white bear infinitely more" (p. 3). "They approach from downwind, snaking their necks from side to side, probing the air, homing in on the scent of man" (p. 7). "On the way to his objective, a bear will crash through brush, swim across meltwater ponds, or destroy houses without a second thought" (p. 41). "Mother bears with cubs also kill more seals than they can possibly need, either to teach the technique to their babies or for the sheer pleasure of the kill" (p. 48). "He is there behind the ice ridge, watching, as the Eskimo builds his snow house. He lurks beneath the overhanging stern of the explorer's brigantine. He waits outside the mission church for an unwary child to finish her prayers. He creeps silently past the fence guarding a military installation. He hides beneath the steel steps of an oil-drilling rig. Always, it seems, the bear is waiting" (p. 89). And so forth! Says the Henry Holt promotional catalogue: "Polar bears are not cute, furry beasts but, rather, dangerous thousand pound predators — the only mammals that habitually stalk and eat humans." Other reviewers also have noticed this emphasis on fear of bears. "Beware the bear" was the conclusion of the writers at *Kirkus Reviews* (1990), and the *Los Angeles Times* (Kirsch, 1990) called *White Bear* a "Chilling look at the king of the arctic."

Polar bears *can* be dangerous. When visiting the Arctic, people must be careful and aware of the threats bears may present. However, they are not omnipresent, they are not out to get you — they are normally out to get seals — and they are not evil! Sensationalism may get a reader's attention. But as Feazel admits, polar bears are fascinating enough "that no embellishment is needed" (p. 43). As humans increasingly come into contact with polar bears, I feel that all authors should be striving to convey respect and understanding rather than fear. We know too well how fear guided the disappearance of grizzly bears and wolves from much of North America. Feazel warns ". . . the white bear sits atop a shaky throne: he is powerless and mute when confronting human establishments and depends on the voices of others — mine included — for his very survival" (p. 191). The message of fear pervading *White Bear* suggests that Feazel has not taken his own warning seriously!

Sources of information presented in *White Bear* are referenced in a series of end notes organized by chapter. Support for important

statements was usually there, and most statements appear to be accurate. There are some obvious errors, however. For example: Polar bears are marine mammals, ecologically and legally, and they can swim quite well. But, in contrast to statements on pages 10, 27 and 78, they are not as much at home in water as on land or on the ice. Polar bears are not aquatic. In fact, they appear to avoid immersion during the colder months. Polar bears are, throughout their range, the largest of the bears. The brown bears living on the Alaska peninsula and Kodiak Island are as large. However, over the rest of their range, brown bears are smaller than polar bears, and despite the statements on page 28, those brown bears occurring in the interior of North America called "grizzlies" are substantially smaller than polar bears. I am not aware of data showing polar bear hair to be an important energy-gathering adaptation. According to David Lavigne (1988), who discovered that polar bears absorb UV light, this is "scientific folklore"! Polar bears do not "prefer" (in a human context) seal pups (p. 33); they simply find them easy to catch and thus an efficient energy source at certain times. If bigger lumps of energy were as easily available, they would "prefer" those. Genuine articles of clothing or handicraft legally can be sold or bartered. Polar bear remains that have not been converted to handicraft items cannot be transferred, however (p. 195).

Behavioral and natural historical information, even though it is substantially correct, is presented in very general terms, with little attempt to explain what is described. For example, Feazel chooses to attribute surplus killing (p. 48) to pleasure rather than to relate some of the current hypotheses explaining it. Summer activities (or lack of them) among polar bears are described as if what occurs in Hudson Bay is what occurs throughout the polar bear range (chapters 4, 6), and the reader is not given an inkling that it is not. Methods used by bears to catch prey are mentioned several places, but little interpretive effort is evident.

I am also disturbed by Feazel's conclusions regarding threats to the future of polar bears. Shooting is the single greatest human cause of mortality among polar bears (p. 217). The important thing, however, is not the *fact* of hunting mortalities, but their *effect*. Hunting is a mortality factor that can be managed, and it is now tightly regulated in almost all jurisdictions. Feazel objects (p. 197) to language used by bear managers. Yet, to manage any renewable resource effectively, a non-anthropomorphic language must be used. Quotas established by scientific studies set a kill or harvest that will not harm the population but will continue to allow humans to derive benefits from bears, as they have for thousands of years. The language used to explain management efforts must be as precise and objective as the science on which it is based. Other potential sources of mortality that are beyond the control of managers are much scarier. Yet, Feazel naively claims that an *Exxon Valdez*-size oil spill in arctic waters would "be easily recovered" (p. 217-218). That, of course, is ridiculous. I am not aware of anyone — scientist, petroleum engineer or regulator — who thinks such an event would be anything other than a disaster of the greatest proportions. Fortunately the likelihood of such an event seems low.

*White Bear* reads well and is entertaining enough to hold the reader's attention. The intended audience for *White Bear* is not clear, however. The text is too general to be of value to scientists or curious armchair naturalists. So it is not likely to be a useful reference volume for many private libraries or scientific collections. The few photographs used are adequate to illustrate their captions, but they lack the attention-getting quality of photos used in other polar bear books on the market. Thus, it is not a "coffee-table" volume. Finally, the sensationalist bent and the lack of natural history detail, along with occasional errors, make *White Bear* less than desirable for school or public libraries. Readers who must have all polar bear or arctic memorabilia will want to add *White Bear* to their collections. However, most readers may want to make another choice. For easy to read, accurate and thorough information on polar bears and superb photos, Stirling's *Polar Bears* (1988) is hard to beat, and for the price conscious, it is now available in paper binding. Other volumes with excellent photos for the coffee table,

significant information for the reference library, or both, include: Larsen (1978), Davids (1982), Mills (1986) and Bruemmer (1989).

## REFERENCES

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*Response from the author:*

The intent of *White Bear* is not to sensationalize, but rather to present the honest reactions of arctic workers who encounter polar bears and to record my own path to understanding these magnificent creatures. Thus the book moves from 1) the opening chapter detailing my emotions, including fear, when sharing the November icepack with these predators, through 2) the biology and behavior of polar bears reported by reputable scientists in refereed literature, and 3) the evolutionary history of polar bears and their interaction with Inuit hunters and early explorers, to 4) personal accounts of bear encounters and interviews with biologists and resource managers, and finally to 5) a plea for conservation and discussion of national and international measures adopted to preserve the bears and their habitat.

Your reviewer feels that "all authors should be striving to convey respect and understanding, rather than fear." I couldn't agree more. That is precisely why the book moves through the above sequence, but even at the start (p. 3) I wrote of my feelings for the polar bear: "More than fear, I respect it." I also made it a point to quote a wildlife biologist's comment that "there's no such thing as problem bears — only problem people" (p. 144), and that in encounters with humans, the bears are just behaving naturally. On page 175 I debunk a powerful image implanted in the minds of North American television viewers by well-known footage showing a photographer in a cage outside Churchill, with a polar bear shoving and biting the cage bars: "Absolute rubbish!" snorts a man who was present during the filming. 'Irresponsible reporting! The bear wasn't aggressive in the least. To enhance the action, the film crew lathered the steel cage with whale oil. The bear wasn't trying to eat the man — he was just licking the oil off the bars.' "

Through such anecdotes I emphasize that I don't feel polar bears are "out to get you" or "evil," as your reviewer suggests I must believe. I suspect the readers of *Arctic* would agree with my view, expressed on page 144: "Like humans, bears are gentle, expressive, and playful. Like humans, they can be aggressive killers. They're not malicious or evil, but they are dangerous predators, and deserve respect."

Other reviewers have appreciated the significance of the book's progression from fear to respect to admiration to concern. As one wrote, "While there are plenty of adventures, anecdotes, and personal observations included, this is not a *How I Survived a Polar Bear Attack* book. Rather, it is a readable, well-balanced, and

rational look at bear life in the far north. . . . Frequently he writes with the passion of a convert to conservation" (Buchholtz, 1991).

On the role of polar bear hair as a solar collector: while discussing this as an intriguing possibility (and the subject of investigation by solar-energy researchers), I also pointed out (p. 33) that it cannot be a significant component of a bear's energy budget because the sun shines on a bear during the months when he needs its energy the least.

The possibility of an oil spill in arctic seas is not a topic that I dismiss lightly. Rather, I agree with the biologist quoted on page 219 that it "would be uncontrollable and could be a catastrophe beyond anything we could imagine." And I never claimed that a spill the size of the slick from the *Exxon Valdez* would be easy to recover; my remarks (p. 217-218) concern the physical behavior of oil in the colder waters of the High Arctic compared to the waters of Prince William Sound.

As to my "objecting" to the language used by bear managers, I have nothing but respect for the professionalism of resource managers, but find their vocabulary, as with most specialties, too businesslike (or, as your reviewer suggests, non-anthropomorphic) for my readers to swallow without some measure of explanation or levity.

Far from trying to create a hysteria about polar bears that would lead to further human-bear confrontations, I present a balance among many viewpoints. The book (selected as one of the best books of 1990 by the editors of *Booklist*) quotes biologists, geologists, icebreaker officers, aircraft pilots, natives, explorers, oilmen, engineers, sea ice specialists, legal experts, zoo curators, and others in attempting to define what the white bear means to each. In disparaging my writing because of its perceived sensationalism, your reviewer does a disservice to those who graciously agreed to be interviewed, and whose voices I have tried to portray faithfully. Your reviewer may not care for the feelings these individuals express, but they are genuine, and accurately reported.

## REFERENCES

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- SYDNEY LAURENCE, PAINTER OF THE NORTH. By KESLER E. WOODWARD. Seattle: University of Washington Press, in Association with the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, 1990. 152 p., 120 illus., 90 in colour, notes, bib. Softbound. US\$24.95.

Kesler E. Woodward's exhibition catalogue *Sydney Laurence, Painter of the North* is an important contribution to the art history of the North. Unlike many exhibitions of regional artists, Laurence's work has been placed within the broader context of the aesthetics of its time.

The author tells us that Sydney Mortimer Laurence (1865-1940) is so well known to Alaskans as to need no introduction. Like the Group of Seven to Canadians, Laurence has defined the way Alaskans see their landscape. Living and painting in Anchorage, he was an artist of America's "Last Frontier" from 1903 until his death in 1940. It was a time of no galleries or art museums in Alaska, forcing the artist to rely on his own marketing wits. No wonder that Laurence appears to have embellished his "CV." A bit of a poseur, the unsubstantiated information seems to include a knighthood by England's King Edward VII, a royal commission to paint Queen Victoria lying in state, and acquisition of one of his paintings by the French government for the Louvre.