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Polar bears and parachutes: Addressing safety issues in Nunavut's National Parks

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The Challenge

- Adventure tourism is growing in Nunavut.
- Visitors are increasingly looking for more remote and extreme ways to experience the land.
- Expedition style tourism is not new to Nunavut, however adventurers are now pursuing new experiences, sometimes with greater risks.
- Adventurers often do not consult with communities about risks.
- Local and regional SAR resources may be ill equipped to deal with these new rescues.



New adventures/New activities

- Several new types of adventure are gaining popularity in Nunavut:
 - Kite Skiing
 - Private sailings of the NW Passage
 - Sea kayaking
 - Big wall climbing
 - Base jumping (not permitted in NPs)
- Areas in and around National Parks are attractive for these activities.



Benefits of increased tourism

- New adventurers can bring economic benefits to the community:
 - Guiding services
 - Drop off to locations
 - Accommodations
 - Purchase of arts and crafts
 - Food/equipment purchase
 - Increasing community exposure nationally and internationally.



Pushing the limits

- Many adventurers are seeking out “firsts”.
- Some new activities put visitors in risky areas or have a heightened inherent risk.
- Professional adventurers often have obligations to sponsors that may encourage more risky behaviour, or instil a fear of failure.
- Latest adventure/outside magazines advocate taking risks as a way of "being alive" or shaking off age/getting in a rut.



Limited local input

- Most adventures are planned in the south well before the trip.
- On arrival most groups do not allow sufficient time to gather local input.
- Preferred routes or areas may be in areas where local people chose not to travel.
- Adventurers may be myopic and not consider the external risks.
- Visitors may not be aware or be prepared for all of the risks they may encounter.



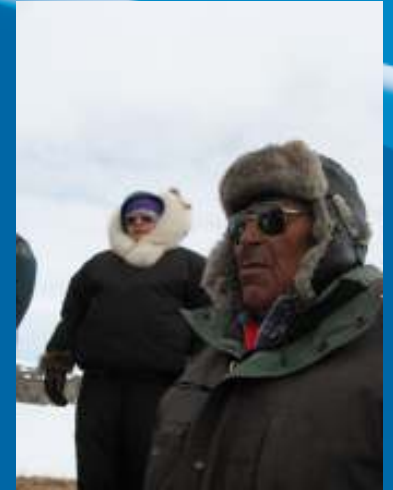
Challenging Rescues

- Limited local input or awareness of trip plans can make initiating and responding to incidents difficult.
- Unfamiliarity with activity or travel method may make search planning difficult.
- Modern technology may not trigger the best responders for an area.
- Unfamiliarity with an area or terrain type, or avoidance of an area for known hazards, may put rescuers at risk.



Some Operational Solutions

- Make safety information available to park visitors at all stages of their trip:
 - website
 - pre-trip planning packages
 - knowledgeable staff responding to enquiries
 - access to local knowledge
- Mandatory orientations for all visitors
- Regulations governing accepted activities
- Management of visitors



Broader Solutions

- Raising awareness of arctic hazards
 - Lead or participate in local, regional, or national hazard awareness programs
- Preventing incidents through education
 - Provide educational opportunities to visitors and local residents to increase safety
- Building capacity through partnerships with local communities
 - Work with local partners to build capacity to provide safety services and respond to incidents.



Case Study

- Polar bears are a hazard in Sirmilik National Park
- Visitors are increasingly interested in visiting areas of high bear concentration
- Many visitors do not adequately understand the risk of encounter and struggle to mitigate this risk or balance it with their trip expectations
- Most visitors come with an inadequate knowledge of bear safety
- Visitors often want to experience viewing polar bears



Bear Education

- Parks Canada has worked to develop the bear safety resources available to visitors:
 - Pamphlets/Videos/Knowledgeable staff
- All materials developed using local and traditional Inuit knowledge, as well as bear management expertise.
- Bear education is an important part of the park orientation.
- However – bear safety equipment is hard to get in local communities.



Safety Equipment

- Support from IPY
- Sirmilik purchased a range of bear safety equipment available for loan to visitors and guides including:
 - Bear spray
 - Deterrent Rounds
 - Electric and alarm fences
- However - supplying equipment alone does not solve the problem.



Integrating Knowledge

- Parks Canada staff cooperated with:
 - Local hunters
 - Inuit elders
 - Bear management experts
 - Industry partners
- Developed a polar bear guard training program that integrated local and traditional knowledge with best practices in bear management.



Building Local Capacity

- 3-day course focussing on minimizing likelihood of bear encounters.
- Includes modules on bear behaviour, deterrence, camp management, client management, and strategies for defence of life.
- Courses co-instructed by Inuit elder and bear management expert.
- Participants are trained to be polar bear guards for visitors, researchers, and local industry.
- 40 people trained in Pond Inlet and Arctic Bay, mostly local young people.



Completing the Circle

- Parks Canada is reviewing its regulations regarding firearms.
- Interim policy allows guides to carry firearms in parks with polar bears.
- Guides can hire trained bear guards to support safe visitors opportunities and advise tourists.
- Training program also increased bear safety awareness in the community.



Summary

- Adventure tourists are going to continue to come north and will constantly bring new activities and challenges to northern SAR.
- Our responsibility is to be ready to respond, but also to work together with local communities to make sure we are addressing issues through awareness, prevention, and by building capacity.

