

# Alaska villagers face dual threat of hungry polar bears, warmer weather

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A polar bear roams Alaska. Photo: Photo by Hoberman Collection/UIG via Getty Images

When Carla SimsKayotuk was getting ready for work last year in one of the U.S. Arctic's northernmost villages, she took a moment to peek outside. "And what do I see? Two huge eyes staring at me. It was a baby polar bear cub," SimsKayotuk recalled. "My eyes got huge and his eyes got huge. I slammed my door shut."

## **Rising Temperatures Affecting Humans And Bears**

Fossil fuels and deforestation have pushed global temperatures up by nearly 2 degrees Fahrenheit since the 1800s, and the Arctic is warming faster than anywhere else. This is driving polar bears onto natives' doorsteps. Sea ice retreats past the shallow continental shelf in the Beaufort Sea off north Alaska into waters that can be too deep for foraging. Increasing numbers of polar bears are then forced to find land on the coast. If they're hungry or curious enough, they roam into Arctic villages.

Warmer temperatures have also melted locals' traditional permafrost freezers that they have relied on for more than 100 years to store whale meat, called muktuk, after their hunts, leaving them open to hungry bear raids.

While images of malnourished polar bears have become a national symbol of the effects of climate change, they are a front line reality for Alaska Natives, who face them on their own property and do not want them to get hurt.

SimsKayotuk would occasionally see a polar bear near her small village of Kaktovik as a child, but never one at her door. This is a sign that they are getting bolder.

“Now we have like 40 bears that are hanging around our area,” she said. “You always have to look out when you step out of your house.”

## **Villagers Looking To Protect Their Food**

Since she cannot control the climate, she is testing a costly, designer, bear-resistant storage container, which she hopes can replace the permafrost ones and teach the bears that there is nothing for them in the villages.

With the increased numbers of bears in town, “it’s hard to keep [muktuk] safe because that just became an attractor,” she says.

Locals and wildlife activists know that the more humans and bears interact, the greater chance there is that someone or one of the bears will get hurt. So there are two efforts underway to help them properly store food.

Last fall, the nonprofit Defenders of Wildlife shipped four specially-designed stainless steel food containers to Kaktovik. They are six feet long and cost \$10,000 each. SimsKayotuk is one of the people testing the containers.

“They made it through the first winter and it looks like they’re doing really well into winter number two,” said Karla Dutton, the Alaska program director for the nonprofit. She feels good about the containers, but also wants to wait and see if they continue to be successful.

Dutton said she is applying for grants and asking donors to help pay for more because “I think everyone will need to find an alternative to their ice cellars.”

The nonprofit Kaktovik Community Foundation is also two years into building an underground cellar that locals say might be ready for trial next winter.

## **Hunger Bringing Bears Closer To Humans**

Meanwhile, polar bears continue to be lured to the area by regularly-timed bone piles left over from the bowhead whale hunts about a mile-and-a-half away from town.

While this phenomenon has turned Kaktovik into a popular tourist spot, the bears are starting to show up earlier and stay later as the open water season gets longer. If there isn’t any food, they might start wandering into town.

“There’s some evidence that shows that bears that are nutritionally stressed are more bold,” said scientist Todd Atwood, who researches polar bear behavior at the U.S. Geological Survey. “At the same time, we’re seeing dramatic decreases in the sea ice ... it’s not really part of their historical life history to spend extended periods of time on land.”

Atwood and other federal researchers recently found that polar bears that would usually live on ice in the southern Beaufort Sea are now three times as likely to come ashore as they were in the mid-1980s. Researchers also found that the Beaufort Sea population has rapidly dwindled from about 1,500 in 2006 to just over 900 in 2010, while the body mass of the average female has fallen by about 66 pounds, or about 7 percent, he said.

After SimsKayotuk slammed the door on the cub, she called her husband, 911 and the village’s Polar Bear Patrol – except she is on the Polar Bear Patrol, the team tasked with scaring the bears away from town with cars, quads, noise and beanbag guns.

Eventually, the cub, which had a sibling and its mom with it, left. Her husband came home and no one was hurt. But these encounters could grow more hostile as the animals stay longer and get hungrier.

Dutton said there’s been an increased interest from the community for the storage containers.

“Back in 2008, people were saying, ‘Well, I still have an ice cellar,’” she said.

Not anymore. SimsKayotuk said there’s only one working permafrost cellar that remains in their village of about 250 people.

“They have all just kind of filled up with water,” she said.

## Quiz

- 1 The central idea of the article is developed by:
- (A) describing the causes of global warming and offering solutions for the problem
  - (B) explaining why polar bears are appearing in a village in Alaska and how people are responding
  - (C) illustrating how villagers' lives are in constant danger due to the possibility of bear attacks
  - (D) providing information on the normal hunting and dieting patterns of polar bears
- 2 Which of the following excerpts from the article is MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) Locals and wildlife activists know that the more humans and bears interact, the greater chance there is that someone or one of the bears will get hurt. So there are two efforts underway to help them properly store food.
  - (B) While this phenomenon has turned Kaktovik into a popular tourist spot, the bears are starting to show up earlier and stay later as the open water season gets longer. If there isn't any food, they might start wandering into town.
  - (C) Eventually, the cub, which had a sibling and its mom with it, left. Her husband came home and no one was hurt. But these encounters could grow more hostile as the animals stay longer and get hungrier.
  - (D) Not anymore. SimsKayotuk said there's only one working permafrost cellar that remains in their village of about 250 people.  
"They have all just kind of filled up with water," she said.
- 3 Which of the following options BEST describes Carla SimsKayotuk's reaction when she opened her door and found herself facing a baby polar bear?
- (A) annoyed
  - (B) shocked
  - (C) frightened
  - (D) sympathetic

4 According to the article, what is the MOST important reason why the villagers of Kaktovik want to get more storage containers and build better ice cellars?

- (A) Since temperatures are rising, the villagers need improved storage facilities to keep their whale meat from spoiling.
- (B) The villagers hope that if polar bears can't access their whale meat, they won't have a reason to come into the village.
- (C) The polar bears destroyed the villagers' existing storage containers and ice cellars because they wanted the food inside.
- (D) The villagers hope that if they can store more meat, they won't have to go out to hunt and risk being attacked by polar bears.