



eye  
witness

Daniel J. Cox



Ten years ago Daniel J. Cox saw the change: The bears had to wait longer and longer for the ice to form up. "Every year since the late '80s I'd go up to Churchill [Manitoba] around the first of November to photograph the polar bears," Dan says. "I began to notice over the years that the ice was forming later and later in the season. The bears depend on the ice to get to the marine mammals they feed on. If the bears can't get out on the ice, they stand little chance of getting enough food. Eventually they'll starve."

He noticed other things as well. "I remember jumping over snowbanks in Churchill, and serious, harsh winters were underway by early November. In the last six years it's consistently gotten warmer. Last year I was in Winnipeg on November 7, and it was like early fall—the fall colors were out and there was no snow on the ground. Now, when it's 70 degrees in New York City in January, everybody is aware of something changing; but I've been seeing the changes for many years."

As the Arctic ice melts—*National Geographic* has reported that it's shrunk to its lowest level on record—the polar bear population declines. It is down 15 percent in the last decade, and the U.S. government is considering classifying polar bears as an endangered species.

"In the last five years, half the time I've gone to photograph the bears I haven't even been able to get to Cape Churchill because the ice has not been thick enough to drive across to get to the camp," Dan says. "We're hearing that the polar bears could be gone in 30 to 40 years. People can't believe they may become extinct, but without the ice, they'll have no way to feed."

About five years ago Dan started working with the conservation group Polar Bears International ([www.polarbearsinternational.org](http://www.polarbearsinternational.org)); he's now on their advisory board. They've used his photographs to promote their activities, in the same way his images have been used over the years by other conservation groups, including the Natural Resources Defense Council, the National Wildlife Federation and the World Wildlife Fund.

"The goal of Polar Bears International is to bring all people interested in polar bears—scientists, researchers, native

people, photographers, tour operators—to the table to discuss issues relevant to the bears, and to bring these issues to the general public."

There is some good news. "Polar bears are so popular, and have such a wide appeal," Dan says, "that the situation is connecting with people. They're becoming concerned with the entire climate issue because of its effect on the bears. They're beginning to realize what's at stake."

And what's at stake is far more than the polar bears. "It's everything," Dan says. "The bears, for all our concern about them, are only a small part of the problem. If humans think they're not in danger, they're not thinking clearly."

Photographers like Dan have been the early warning system, the eyewitnesses to climate change. "You become a nature photographer because you want to share what you're seeing and experiencing," Dan says. "I want to encourage people to appreciate and value their world and its creatures. Think about the animals, how special they are and how much they're a part of what we do and how we live."



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## ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Dan took the images you see here from a Tundra Buggy. He not only photographs from these slow-moving blinds, he also leads workshops for their owners and operators, Tundra Buggy Adventure ([www.tundrabuggy.com](http://www.tundrabuggy.com)). "The buggies make it easy for people to safely view and photograph the animals," Dan says. "They're usually at the edge of Hudson Bay—there are trails out there, originally created by the military, on the huge sandy berms that the buggies use, so you're on land most of the time, but sometimes they venture out on the ice of the inland lakes." The bears have become acclimated to the buggies, so

photo opportunities are plentiful. "The drivers are considerate of the bears," Dan says. "They never chase after them. It's similar to being in Africa and photographing from vehicles. There are usually ten people in each buggy during our Cape Churchill trips."

The photographs were taken with a variety of Nikon cameras, from an F5 up to Dan's current digital SLRs, the D2x and D200. "My prime lens right now is the 200-400mm [200-400mm f/4G ED-IF AF-S VR Zoom-Nikkor]. Since the buggies don't move a lot, it's important to have the reach of a long telephoto zoom." The participants' cameras

are steadied by beanbags or window mounts. The other vehicle you see is Tundra Buggy #1, a customized buggy that was used for the Polar Bear Cam project, a partnership of *National Geographic*, Polar Bears International, Wildlife HD.com and Tundra Buggy Adventure that last fall brought live streaming video of polar bears to wildlife enthusiasts around the world via the *National Geographic* website. There's more information about the Polar Bear Cam at Dan's website, [www.naturalexposures.com](http://www.naturalexposures.com). To go *Inside the Image* with Daniel J. Cox visit [www.nikonnet.com](http://www.nikonnet.com).



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