

Report

Examining the Potential for Wildlife Tourism in Eeyou Istchee, Northern Quebec, Canada

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Abstract: Well-established wildlife tourism destinations like Churchill, Manitoba and Svalbard, Norway provide visitors with the opportunity to view charismatic megafauna through well-established travel connections, infrastructures, and marketing strategies. Cree and Inuit communities in more peripheral areas of northern Canada are also seeking to diversify local economic opportunities through wildlife tourism. Unlike these more established wildlife tourism destinations, however, these smaller communities are often defined as remote, difficult to access, and in the case of polar bear viewing opportunities, virtually unknown. Despite these limitations, the growth of “last chance tourism” and opportunities for wildlife tourists to participate in less-commercialized and more localized polar bear viewing experiences do exist. This report presents a site assessment and product development report examining the potential of developing small-scale wildlife tourism opportunities featuring polar bear viewing in Eeyou Istchee (Cree for The People’s Land), the traditional territory of the James Bay Cree in Northern Quebec. The report suggests that access to polar bears may provide an opportunity for the Cree community of Wemindji to distinguish itself from similar offerings by combining wildlife tourism and Aboriginal tourism, and by developing a product that showcases their knowledge and management approach to wildlife.

Introduction

Concerns for the well-being of polar bears (*wabusk* in Cree) at the provincial, Canadian, and international levels have resulted in their inclusion on several lists of species at risk. Polar bears are listed as “vulnerable” on the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species; as a species of “special concern” by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) (McLoughlin et

al., 2008), and, as of 2011, under Canada's Species at Risk Act (Department of Justice Canada, 2011a). Reported decreases in body condition and documented declines in survival rates prompted the Committee on the Status of Species at Risk in Ontario (COSSARO) to list them as "threatened" (Tonge et al., 2011), and they are considered "vulnerable" under the "Loi sur les espèces menacées ou vulnérable" in Quebec (Ressources naturelles et Faune Quebec, 2010).

These legislative changes to the status of polar bears throughout North America have coincided, at least from a media perspective, with climate change, polar bear populations declining worldwide, and increasing human-polar bear conflicts (Slocum, 2004; Stewart et al., 2012). This growing media awareness has, in some cases, resulted in increasing concern for the welfare of polar bears, while in others it has piqued interest and consequently stimulated a demand to view polar bears in their natural environment before these animals disappear—an activity referred to as "last chance tourism" (Dawson et al., 2010; Dawson et al., 2011; Lemelin et al., 2010a; Lemelin et al., 2012).

Destinations such as Churchill, Manitoba have capitalized on the growing interest and resulting travel trends (i.e., last chance tourism), while other sites like Arviat, Nunavut and the Fort Severn and Weenusk First Nations near Polar Bear Provincial Park, Ontario have not generated, until very recently, much visitor interest (Lemelin et al., 2010b; Stewart et al., 2012). Travel costs, accessibility, product delivery, and poor marketing strategies are some of the reasons attributed to this lack of growth. In Polar Bear Provincial Park, where some polar bear tourism (PBT) opportunities are offered, these challenges are exacerbated by bureaucratic apathy and agency resistance (i.e., the Ministry of Natural Resources) to tourism developments (Lemelin & Dyck, 2007; Lemelin & McIntyre, 2011; Lemelin et al., 2010b). Despite these challenges, proponents in certain locations in Nunavut (Arviat, Ukkusiksalik National Park), Eeyou Istchee (the traditional territory of the James Bay Cree in Quebec), and Nunavik (the territory of the Inuit of Northern Quebec) have initiated, or expressed an interest in, developing PBT opportunities in these areas of the Canadian North (Lemelin & Dyck, 2007; Stewart et al., 2012). Many of these proponents believe that by offering smaller-scale viewing opportunities, focusing more on the experiential (through sight, sound, and smell) and cultural dimensions, a more authentic PBT experience than those currently being offered in Svalbard and Churchill can be provided. Others have assumed that providing access to view polar bears will suffice (personal communication). However, as we discuss later, basing a wildlife tourism product on one species, whether the local tourism

industry is well-developed or not, may not be enough to attract sufficient tourist traffic to sustain a local industry.

A site assessment conducted by the authors in the winter of 2011 suggests that polar bear viewing from an airplane in the winter is logistically and financially prohibitive; however, what may be feasible is an experiential and cultural approach to wildlife tourism. The discussion and conclusion propose that by broadening the scope of PBT to include other types of wildlife while incorporating socio-cultural dimensions into the experience, these wildlife tourism offerings may appeal to tourists who are attracted to Subarctic regions of Canada.

Wildlife Tourism and Aboriginal Tourism

Wildlife viewing, also referred to as wildlife tourism, is considered one of the fastest growing outdoor activities in the world (Higams & Lück, 2007; Higginbottom, 2004; Newsome et al., 2005). Wildlife tourism has been defined as including both consumptive and non-consumptive activities including harvesting, observing, feeding, touching, and photographing wildlife (Lovelock, 2008). Wildlife tourism outings can be designed to accommodate either high or low tourism volume; have a narrowly defined focus such as engaging wildlife (i.e., harvesting or viewing a specific mammal or bird species); be the main attractant or simply one component of a larger pre-packaged trip; generate revenue based on high or low end markets; and pursue domestic or international clientele (Roe et al., 1997). The experience of wild animals can occur in captive (e.g., aviaries, zoos, oceanariums, aquariums), semi-captive (e.g., wildlife parks, rehabilitation centres, sea pens, food conditioned situations), and wild (e.g., national parks, protected areas, migratory routes) environments (Shackley, 1996).

Despite the long history of providing consumptive tourism opportunities (hunting and fishing) in northern communities (Dowsley, 2009; Hamley, 1991; Hunt et al., 2005), wildlife tourism for the purposes of this article is defined as a tourism activity involving the non-consumptive experience of wild animals in natural areas. In the case of bear-viewing, as we describe next, viewers expect to see animals that are predictable, accessible, and active (Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001).

The demand for bear-viewing programs as a specialized form of wildlife tourism has gained wide acceptance throughout the world (Lemelin & Dyck, 2007). In North America, black bears, brown (grizzly) bears, and polar bears can be viewed from tour buses in Denali National Park and photographed from gravel platforms along the banks of the McNeil River, while Kermode bears in British Columbia (also known as spirit or ghost bears) are viewed

from boats (Blood, 1997; Lemelin & Maher, 2009). Polar bears can be viewed from cruise ships in the archipelago of Svalbard, Norway and in Tornat Mountains National Park (Maher & Lemelin, 2011); and from helicopters and/or tundra vehicles in Churchill, Manitoba. Tourists can also view them feeding on harvested whale carcasses in Barrow, Alaska (Lemelin, 2007; Lemelin & Dyck, 2007). A number of these locations have benefitted from a combination of factors—such as improved accessibility through new transportation routes, advances in the technology of helicopters and icebreaker cruise ships, and improved access to information through the Internet—making these destinations attractive travel alternatives (Johnston, 2006; Notzke, 2006).

Focusing an entire tourism experience on viewing a particular animal, in this case polar bears, presents different types of challenges, including the tourist's expectation for proximity and activity, and in the case of PBT in Churchill, the quantification of the experience, where more bears equal a more satisfying experience (Lemelin & Smale, 2006). In these instances, failure to see and photograph many polar bears may result in dissatisfaction and loss of future revenue. Solely focusing on charismatic mega-fauna, suggest Lemelin (2006) and Kerley et al. (2003), also hinders the possibility of using other senses in wildlife tourism or re-directing the gaze onto other fauna (for additional examples see Wolenberg's 2011 study on Madagascar's herpetofauna and Huntly et al.'s 2005 study on invertebrates in South African safaris). Diversification through providing new cultural experiences, such as those offered by Aboriginal tourism, is how some of these wildlife tourism products can, as we suggest next, distinguish themselves from others and stimulate greater economic benefit and stability for the host community.

For this particular study, Aboriginal tourism is defined as: special events (dances, festivals, pow-wows); experiential tourism (guided hikes, interpretation, wildlife tourism, applied activities); arts and crafts; museums and historical re-creations; restaurants; accommodations; lodges; and resorts celebrating Aboriginal culture (Getz & Jamieson, 1997).

Economic benefits derived from tourism opportunities stem from the development of local enterprises, provision of local employment, incorporation of fees for licensing or entrance into certain areas, as well as the sale of services and goods. Tourism can lead to the further development of tourism-related infrastructure that can be locally integrated, assist communities in gaining access to funding for capacity building and small enterprise development, and position communities in national and regional conservation strategies (Nepal, 2004; Notzke, 2006). Challenges associated with local equity generation include leakage and the centralization of profits

to an elite or powerful component of the community (Scheyvens, 2002; Smith 1999). Therefore, safeguards such as ownership (in part or whole, transitional or immediate processes) by Aboriginal communities and entrepreneurs are essential components of these enterprises. From this perspective, Aboriginal tourism is defined as a product whose ownership, management, and control of any tourism product is determined by Aboriginal people (Notzke, 2006).

Eeyou Istchee, Wabusk (Polar Bear), the Grand Council of the Crees, and Weminjdi

Eeyou Istchee, meaning “the people’s land” in Cree, is a provincial region in Quebec represented by the Grand Council of the Crees (Fig. 1). The Grand Council represents the Cree Nation of Eeyou Istchee and protects the rights of the Cree in this region (The Grand Council of the Crees, n.d. a, n.d. b). The total land area is approximately 5,586 km² (2,157 sq mi); the territory is inhabited by approximately 18,000 Cree, living along nine coastal villages from eastern James Bay in the south to Southern Hudson Bay in the north (The Grand Council of the Crees, n.d. a). A road, “air and marine transportation system provides the essential goods and services to the residents and is fundamental in keeping the communities connected” (Berclaz et al., 2006, p. 62). Although socio-economic opportunities (i.e., hydroelectric projects) have brought diversification to the Cree Nations of eastern James Bay, the Cree have retained their local lore and livelihood and remain deeply rooted in Eeyou Istchee (Sayles & Mulrennan, 2010).

In order to protect and sustain this livelihood, Cree knowledge has been applied in the establishment of proposed protected areas in Northern Quebec (e.g., the proposed Tawich Marine Conservation Area in Eastern James Bay) (Mulrennan et al., 2009), and for conducting environmental impact assessment reviews on proposed hydroelectric development projects in Northern Quebec (Saganash, 2002). It has also been used for the management of caribou (Berkes, 2008), moose (Jacqmain et al., 2008), and waterfowl (Mulrennan & Scott, 2001; Peloquin & Berkes, 2009). Cree involvement in the management of the 650–900 polar bears found in the Southern Hudson and James Bay area of Ontario, Quebec, and Nunavut (Pulfer et al., 2010) has been, argue Lemelin et al. (2010c), virtually absent until quite recently—despite the Crees’ long history of using this species for meat, fat, medicine, and hides (Bird, 2005, 2007; Crête et al., 1987a, 1987b; Lemelin et al., 2010c; Mulrennan & Scott, 2001).



Figure 1. Eeyou Istchee, meaning “the people’s land” in Cree, a region within the province of Quebec, along east James Bay. Source Ryan Garnett, 2012.

In Quebec, only beneficiaries of the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement have the right to hunt polar bears (Bourbonnais, 2009). The total annual harvest of polar bears in Quebec is approximately fifty-six. According to Bourbonnais (2009), an average of fifteen polar bears have been harvested from the South Hudson Bay subpopulation in Quebec during the period between 1988 and 2006. Most of the harvest in Eeyou Istchee occurs when Cree harvesters from the communities of Chisasibi, Wemindji, and Whapmagoostui (Vandal, 1986) encounter polar bears on the land or near the coast. Most of these harvested hides are sold to fur auctioneers (Crête et al., 1987a, 1998b; Vandal, 1986).

In an attempt to limit anthropogenic impacts on polar bears, the Cree of Eeyou Istchee implemented harvest restrictions in 1984. Since then, no bears have been harvested during the period between June 1 and August

31, and females and cubs in their dens are protected at all times (Crête et al., 1987a, 1987b). The right for the Cree of Eeyou Istchee to harvest polar bears has been ratified in the 2010 Eeyou Marine Region Land Claims Agreement (Department of Justice Canada, 2011b).

The Grand Council of the Crees, the Offshore Agreement, and the Proposed Tawich NMCA

The Grand Council of the Crees is a signatory of the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, the 2002 “La Paix des Braves” agreement (Agreement Respecting a New Relationship Between the Cree Nation and the Government of Quebec), the proposal to establish the Tawich national marine conservation area, the 2010 Eeyou Marine Region (EMR) Land Claim Agreement (now the Eeyou Marine Region Land Claims Agreement Act, which came into force February 2012), and Le Plan Nord (Quebec’s comprehensive sustainable development strategy in Northern Quebec, which includes mining, development projects, tourism, and the creation of protected areas). These are some of the most recent initiatives promoting conservation and sustainability in Eeyou Istchee. The EMR, Le Plan Nord, and the proposed Tawich National Marine Conservation Area also have implications for tourism developments in the region.

Encompassing 61,650 km² of water and 2,722 islands, the three-zoned management plan (Cree Lands, Joint Inuit/Cree, Inuit) of the EMR stretches north of Cotter Island and south to Chiyask Bay in James Bay. Under the agreement, a governance body known as the EMR Wildlife Board will be established and mandated to oversee and regulate wildlife and harvesting in this area. Since the Cree have the exclusive right to harvest certain species like polar bears, Canadian inter-jurisdictional agreements and international wildlife agreements will require consultation with the EMR Wildlife Board (Grand Council of the Crees, n.d. a; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2010).

“Tawich” is the Cree word referring to the sea or marine area adjacent to the coast. The proposal to create the Tawich national marine conservation area, a federal marine protected area administered by Parks Canada, is being spearheaded by the Wemindji Cree Nation and would connect an extensive terrestrial biodiversity reserve (4,300 km²) comprised of the Paakumshumwau (Old Factory River/Rivière du Vieux Comptoir) and Maatuskaau River (Poplar River/Rivière du Peuplier) watersheds with approximately 20,000 km² of coastal, estuarine, and offshore environments (Mulrenann et al., 2009). The marine areas in the Tawich NMCA would consist of the North and South Twin Islands wildlife sanctuary. Mah-Nah-

Woo-Na-N or Twin Islands (North Twin and South Twin islands 53°10'N, 79°55'W) are located within the central region of James Bay, 58 km offshore of mainland Quebec. Approximately 11 km separate North Twin Island (157 km²) and South Twin Island (151 km²) (NU Site 56 – Twin Island, no date). Both islands are composed of low-lying, loosely compacted sand and gravel, with many small lakes, marshland, sand dunes, and wide tidal flats (NU Site 56 – Twin Island, n.d.). An important staging and denning habitat for polar bears, Canada Geese, and Semipalmated Plover (Crête et al., 1987a, 1987b, 1991; Doutt, 1967; Jonkel et al., 1976; Kolenosky & Standfield, 1966; Russell, 1975), Twin Islands was first designated as a wildlife sanctuary in 1939, incorporated in the James Bay Preserve in the late 1940s, and later defined as an Important Bird Area in Canada (Department of Mines and Resources, Ottawa, 1949; Gabrielson, 2010). Discussion with community residents during the site assessment suggest that Cree families travelling to the area have observed a number of bears (mature males, subadults, and females with cubs) during the ice-free season (April–November).

Wemindji (Cree for “red ochre mountain”) is a Cree community (with a 2001 population of 1,267) located at the mouth of the Maquatua River near James Bay in Eeyou Istchee (Cree Nation of Wemindji, 2009). Livelihood activities and other economic development strategies such as hydroelectric development, renewable energy technologies (i.e., wind turbines), and mining are key components of sustainable economic development in the region (Benessaiah et al., 2003). Current tourism activities consist of guiding fishers and hunters and some wildlife tourists. Located within the proposed Tawich NMCA, Mah-Nah-Woo-Na-N is also the traditional territory of various families from Wemindji.

Site Assessment

The goal of phenomenological research (Van Manen, 1990) is to understand how experiences are constructed. Such an approach in a tourism context, suggests that researchers must in essence become wildlife tourists themselves in order to experience and understand the phenomenon and acquire a greater understanding of how experiences are constructed and interpreted by visitors (Curtin, 2005). Indeed, until such research is conducted, it will be difficult to assess opportunities and provide recommendations for wildlife tourism (Curtin, 2005).

In the summer of 2010, initial discussions began between an operator and the Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA) to examine the possibilities of PBT in Eeyou Istchee. The Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA) is a not-for profit tourism association working with all

nine Cree Nations. The mission of COTA is: "To develop and implement a collective vision for a world-class sustainable tourism industry in Eeyou Istchee in harmony with Cree culture and values and involving a partnership among Cree communities, institutions and businesses" (Eeyou Istchee Tourism, n.d.).

In the fall of 2010, COTA organized a teleconference with a tourism operator, Cree outfitters, managers, and a researcher. The goal of this meeting was to examine more closely the possibility of conducting a PBT site assessment trip in Eeyou Istchee. One of the suggestions was to develop a product in Eeyou Istchee different from what is already offered in Churchill, Manitoba. This particular product would be offered in March or April (for sunlight) and provide opportunities for wildlife tourists to see polar bears in their natural environment, out on the sea ice. While concerns were voiced regarding the possibility of not seeing bears out on the ice, some individuals believed that these limitations would be offset by spotting polar bears from aircrafts and snowmobiles near Twin Islands and Wemindji. Soon thereafter, a trip was planned for the winter of 2011.

Four individuals, an operator with over ten years of experience working in the Canadian Arctic, a researcher with over fifteen years of experience in wildlife management, and two international tourists interested in PBT undertook the trip, which lasted a total of six days in the late winter/early spring of 2011. Two days were spent flying over the western and southern portion of the James and Hudson bays, while focusing on the coastal areas of Akimiski and Charleston islands in Ontario. Following this, two days were spent flying over the eastern portion of James Bay, with trips over Bear and Twin islands. A two-day stay with the Cree First Nation of Wemindji included two snowmobile safaris with a local outfitter, and a guided tour of the community. Two days were dedicated to travel. The conclusions of the site assessment reported here are based on the researcher's on-site observations (Adler & Adler, 1994; Berg, 1998), informal discussions with local outfitters and the tourists, and field notes. The conclusions of the site assessment, at the suggestion of ongoing discussions with representatives involved in tourism initiatives in Eeyou Istchee, were provided to key individuals in Wemindji and to the Grand Council of the Crees.

Despite covering a vast area of James Bay and Hudson Bay, only one set of polar bear tracks were spotted near Charleston Island in Ontario at the beginning of the trip, and only one polar bear was spotted on North Twin Island during a flyby on April 10, 2011. Although flying was originally envisioned to provide an aerial view of active polar bears on the sea ice, it provided few opportunities to do so. Flying did, however, provide some

opportunities to observe seals on the sea ice and moose on the islands. The opportunity to view moose was one of the particular highlights reported by the tourists. No polar bears were spotted during the two snowmobile safaris along the coastline of James Bay, although fresh polar bear tracks were found near the community of Wemindji on the second outing. The snowmobile safaris also provided the tourists with an opportunity to travel to the coast, photograph seals and various bird species, and experience first-hand (through sight, sound, and smell) the dynamic nature of the coastal sea ice. The snowmobile safari also provided opportunities for the tourists, researcher, and local outfitter to engage in conversation, and learn much more about Cree lore and livelihood, as well as Cree interactions with wabusk.

Despite seeing other forms of wildlife, the costs and challenges (i.e., extreme weather conditions, lack of ice, poor visibility) associated with flying suggest that viewing polar bears in winter may not be viable in Eeyou Istchee. The primary reason for this is that tourists purchasing PBT products in other locations like Churchill, Manitoba often quantify and define these experiences by the number of bears seen during outings and the photographs taken; thus, low numbers of bears or, worse, no bears, can often result in disappointment or dissatisfaction (Lemelin & Maher, 2009; Lemelin & Smale, 2006). That said, tourist interest in other types of wildlife (moose), landscapes, snowmobiling, and Cree culture, suggest that a wildlife tourism product promoting experiential and cross-cultural exchanges could be developed (Curtin, 2005; Lemelin 2006). From this perspective, PBT would become a component of the experience where opportunities to view and discuss Cree management approaches and concerns vis-a-vis wabusk would be provided. The fact that very little is known by the general population of Cree interactions with polar bears provides an opportunity for the Cree Nations of Eeyou Istchee to develop a product that is unique and quite different from other PBT offerings, while also asserting themselves in future conservation and protection strategies anticipated for the region.

Discussion and Conclusion

Traditional approaches to tourism such as “build it and they will come” have often failed in peripheral and circumpolar regions (Hall & Saarinen, 2010; Müller & Jansson, 2007). In some instances of wildlife tourism, proponents have also falsely assumed that providing access to polar bear viewing in somewhat rustic conditions is sufficient. For remote northern communities with limited opportunities, such assumptions and the resulting bad reviews can represent substantial losses of investment.

The goal of this site assessment study was to examine and determine the viability of establishing polar bear tourism in Eeyou Istchee. The study highlights the importance of building relationships and establishing contacts prior to conducting a site assessment—such as, in this case, working with regional organizations (i.e., COTA) and local outfitters (Blangy et al., 2010; Caine et al., 2009). Contrary to what had been assumed, the site assessment, along with consistent polar bear aggregations in the summer and early fall, suggest the Twin Islands Wildlife Sanctuary is not a potential viewing site for water-based PBT opportunities from Wemindji.

Based on the site assessment, logistical issues, combined with on-site observations and discussions with local outfitters and tourists, suggest that a wildlife tourism product solely based on seeing polar bears from the air may not be viable. Despite hours of flying, only one bear was spotted on our field assessment and it was quite difficult to photograph this animal from the plane. The snowmobile safaris on the other hand provided the visitors with an opportunity to photograph seals and various bird species, and witness first-hand the dynamic nature of coastal sea ice. These two outings also provided opportunities for the tourists, researchers, and the local outfitter to engage in conversation, and learn much more about Cree lore and livelihood. In these situations it was the excitement of being in an unfamiliar territory, combined with the thrill of seeing James Bay and Hudson Bay and their wildlife during the late spring that provided a sense of awe and wonderment. The lore and culture provided by the outfitter was, to paraphrase one traveller, “value-added.”

The interest generated by last-chance tourism, and the challenges noted in other destinations offering PBT (i.e., Polar Bear Provincial Park), suggest that Wemindji’s proximity to Twin Islands, the existing infrastructure (hotel and restaurant) and tourism products, the well-developed regional tourism association, and the trained local outfitters, position Wemindji, should it be so willing, to offer small-scale experiential wildlife tourism opportunities. This could be achieved by broadening the scope of PBT to include migrating bird species, caribou, moose, and other animals while incorporating other natural elements—such as the night skies for star and aurora borealis gazing, and socio-cultural dimensions—into the tourism experience.

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