



ENVIRONMENT

# Hybrid grizzly-polar bears a worrisome sign of the North's changing climate

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In remote Ulukhaktok, an Inuvialuit community of just a few hundred people on the shores of Victoria Island, a testament to the changing face of the North looms large. Very large.

It stands frozen in time, perched on faux-rock with a paw lifted and its jaws open, each at the ready. And yet, something is unusual – its thick, white fur is at odds with its brown legs and paws. And it has a hump, like a grizzly bear.

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Formally called a hybrid, local residents call it grolar, pizzly or polar grizz, the offspring of grizzly and polar bear pairings. This one was killed in April, 2010, and as of this past spring, stands preserved and mounted in the community centre in Ulukhaktok, where the veteran hunter who killed it lives.

The bears, two of which have been killed, are a reality of the new North, where shrinking ice levels and changing climate are driving polar bears back to land and into the expanding habitat of the grizzly.

The mating is a bad sign for those concerned about the fate of the dwindling populations of each type of bear – female polar bears and grizzlies typically give birth to a cub or cubs once every several years. With hybridization becoming more common and a limited fertility cycle, the likelihood of purebred cubs is reduced.

Although they've long been apart, the bears aren't all that different – grizzlies are a type of brown bear, the same species from which polar

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bears evolved as recently as 70,000 years ago.

"You've got two similar species that are overlapping in their habitats, and they're solitary species," said Kris Hundertmark, an associate professor of wildlife ecology at the University of Alaska's Institute of Arctic Biology. "So you have single bears coming into contact with each other, and nature takes its course."

The cross-mating is at least two generations old. DNA testing showed the Ulukhaktok bear was born to a hybrid sow, proving the grolars are fertile, unlike other hybrid animals such as mules.

The first grolar was discovered five years ago. Idaho hunter Jim Martell paid \$45,000 for a licence to shoot and kill a polar bear. He got a grolar, the first known hybrid killed. At the time, he faced the possibility of prison time for illegally shooting a grizzly before it was ruled his kill had enough polar bear in it to count as a member of that species. (Since 2008, when the United States listed polar bears as a threatened species, it has been illegal to import pelts – even of bears legally hunted in Canada.)

The new breed is rare, and valuable. Mr. Martell kept his. The second one sold for \$17,000 – to the territorial government, which had it mounted and sent back to the community as something of a tourist attraction. All told, it cost the government \$25,000.

"I'd never seen that kind before. It's a really nice bear," said David Kuptana, 52, the Ulukhaktok hunter who last year killed the second hybrid bear. "At the beginning, I thought it was a, what would you call it, a blond grizzly, you know? But they said it was a hybrid bear."

The climate on Victoria Island has changed since he was a child, he said. Mr. Kuptana killed his first bear when he was 9. "We've started seeing things we don't see here before. So the grizzlies are going to start getting into hybrid animals," he said.

The bears passed through the shop of Greg Robertson, Yellowknife's taxidermist. Business has been slow for Mr. Robertson, 45, since the United States banned the import of polar bear pelts. The two grolars, he said, made an interesting change for him – one was more grizzly, the other more polar.

"It was just kind of a treat, something different to work on," said Mr. Robertson.

As ice levels continue to shrink, Prof. Hundertmark said, many expect to see the number of hybrid bears increase. Others have been sighted around Victoria Island, Mr. Kuptana added, but there have still been just two confirmed hybrid bears killed.

Ulukhaktok is visited by the occasional cruise ship and is home to North America's northernmost nine-hole golf course. The territory believes that buying the rare bear for the town was a worthwhile investment – another attraction in the changing North.

"They were building a new community centre and they wanted some sort of display, an interpretive display," said Don Craik, a territorial tourism manager in the region. "And they thought that might be a good addition to it. I think they were right."

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