



# Wild bears, real bears and zoo bears: Authenticity and nature in Anthropocene tourism

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## Abstract

Within nature-based tourism research, authenticity has received a great deal of attention in relation to existential authenticity and in examining the authenticity of experiences. Yet very little research exists that explores the ways in which tourists perceive wildlife as more or less authentic, as objects in nature-based tourism discourses. This qualitative case study research explores visitors' perspectives in relation to polar bear tourism in Churchill, Manitoba (in situ) and at the Assiniboine Park Zoo's 'Journey to Churchill' exhibit (ex situ) in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The 'Journey to Churchill' exhibit was built with the intention of representing aspects of the landscape, wildlife and town-site found in and around Churchill, Manitoba. These two sites provide a unique opportunity to compare in situ and ex situ nature-based tourism experiences, since the sites have similar elements such as wildlife species, landscape features and other contextual factors (such as environmental issues and cultural influence). The findings from this research suggests that perceived authenticity of the polar bears, more than the experience, contributes to the construction of learning experiences about climate change. We review the work of authenticity in nature-based tourism and suggest a rethinking of the work of authenticity for both educators and operators in nature tourism. This research has important implications for better understanding how visitors construct their perceptions of authenticity of wildlife and the implications for the ways in which wildlife tourism experiences and authenticity narratives are constructed in Anthropocene tourism.

## Keywords

authenticity, nature-based tourism, wildlife tourism, wildness

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## Introduction

Um. . . really different. I think that seeing the bears. . . in Churchill where they're not locked up and, I don't know, maybe there's like - there's just a different sense of awe of nature if you can actually see it in real. . . They're actually *real bears* that are there. I just think when you see animals in the wild, it's a really different thing.

– Leanne (Visitor at the Zoo), emphasis added

Within tourism studies, authenticity has traditionally been bound to objects, places or experiences. In this paper, we want to consider how authenticity is facilitated by tourists' perceptions of the animals they see, specifically polar bears. Perception here refers to the way in which the visitors interpret their experience into a meaningful narrative. As tourist experiences of animals are increasingly tied to conservation messaging, perceived authenticity holds power not just for the success of the tourist experience, but also for the success of different conservation strategies and larger discourses. We outline the complex terrain on which this authority is built, illustrating how the construction of authenticity through the animals is tied to larger stories about the Anthropocene. Our investigation is based on two different polar bear tourism experiences in Manitoba, Canada. One of the primary tourist destinations in Manitoba is the town of Churchill, where tourists can view polar bears as they gather on the subarctic shores of Hudson Bay waiting for the ice to form in late October. In Winnipeg, 1000 km to the south, tourists and locals alike are able to visit the *Journey to Churchill* exhibit at the Assiniboine Park Zoo, which features (very real) polar bears from Churchill along with a number of other in situ replications (including other sub-arctic animals and a faux townsite with ATVs and snowmobiles). In answer to the question 'how is the zoo different from Churchill?' Leanne (above) is suggesting, intentionally or not, that polar bears in the zoo are not 'real bears'. This response shifts the discourse of nature-based tourism authenticity towards visitors' perceptions of the authenticity of living beings. We address this shift by outlining the ways this authenticity is produced in the different locales and how this change in focus can help understand nature tourism in the Anthropocene.

While this exploration of the production of authenticity through tourists' ideas about the bears they encounter is important for the long-standing concern for authenticity in tourism, the unique circumstances of these particular bears also make this investigation relevant to how tourism participates in the larger discourses around the Anthropocene. The long-term survival of polar bears worldwide is significantly impacted by the increasing rate of climate change, which is causing demonstrable impacts in the Arctic region (Dawson et al., 2010; Gossling, 2013; Molnár et al., 2010). Our two research sites are linked by provincial legislation that enables the capture of orphaned polar bears in Churchill for display at the Assiniboine Park Zoo in order to 'benefit the long-term well-being of polar bears around the world' (The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, 2011). This legislation—The Polar Bear Protection Act—was passed in 2002 and updated in 2010 to ensure that the capture of any polar bears in Manitoba was justified and that they were given proper care. At the present time, all of the polar bears on display in the exhibit were captured near Churchill over the past decade. The *Journey to Churchill* exhibit is mandated to educate visitors on polar bear habitat and threats to the species' survival.

Our research suggests that the perceived authenticity of the bears (more than the experience) may affect participants' learning experiences about climate change. This leads us to suggest both a rethinking of the work of authenticity for educators and tour operators as well as a need to challenge the way the authenticity of 'nature' works within tourism. There is currently minimal research on authenticity that addresses the construction of wilderness – particularly where wildlife is perceived as more or less authentic – and even less on authenticity and nature in the context of nature conservation (Vidon et al., 2018). For educators, this research demonstrates that setting up conditions whereby tourists experience an authentic connection to the animals has the potential to increase the learning opportunity. At the same time, while it is essential to increase the effectiveness of climate change education, we caution against enshrining a problematic ideal of nature into our messages about climate change and wildlife protection.

To make our argument, we review the literature on authenticity in tourism, focussing specifically on the need to understand the work of authenticity within nature tourism. From there, we bring our attention back to the two sites, showing how they attempt to present authentic experiences of bears to their visitors. Through interviews with participants we show how these experiences were received, specifically around the perception of bears as what we call real bears, wild bears and zoo bears. Finally, we analyse these experiences with both of our recommendations in mind to provide some direction for future research.

## **The work of authenticity**

For the past five decades the concepts of authenticity have been clarified, reconceptualized and expanded (Lovell and Bull, 2017; MacCannell, 1973; Rickly-Boyd, 2013; Wang, 1999). Today, authenticity research in tourism tends to focus on existential authenticity via the visitor experience rather than experiencing authentic objects (Knudsen et al., 2016; Rickly-Boyd, 2012, 2013; Vidon, 2017). However, while existential authenticity offers meaningful insights into understanding visitors' perceptions of authenticity of their experiences, for some visitors the objects in tourism still matter (Rickly-Boyd, 2013). Rickly-Boyd (2013) argues that object-oriented approaches to understanding authenticity need to remain an important part of the literature, and that the difference lies in understanding existential authenticity as activity-based rather than object-based. An analysis of the objects that are used to construct authenticity in tourist experiences allows us to interrogate both the subjective experience of those objects as well as the socio-spatial dimensions of tourism experiences' (Rickly-Boyd, 2013: 680–681).

This paper examines the ways in which wildlife are constructed as more or less authentic objects in nature-based tourism discourses, and thereby attempts to address Rickly-Boyd's (2012) question of 'what does authenticity do' by understanding how visitors perceive live animals as more or less authentic. To answer this question we need to recognize that authenticity, as a fundamental part of the tourist experience, 'works' within the tourist landscape. Tourism operates within specifically produced landscapes and, as the cultural geographer Mitchell (1996, 2000) reminds us, landscapes work in two ways. First, landscapes are physical outcomes of a host of labour practices, making them what Mitchell calls a piece of work. Landscapes are shaped by the physical process

within the environment, but also by the physical and conceptual work of humans (c.f. Baker, 2002; Wilson, 1991). This is quite clear within tourist landscapes, where the original attraction—a canyon, mountainside or even a particular part of a city—is reshaped by tourist infrastructure (including roads, hotels, signs and brochures, Colten and Dilsaver, 1995). This infrastructure brings the landscape together as a constructed experience, a culturally produced landscape. The material infrastructure is enhanced by the discursive production of the landscape as an object of desire for tourists, which might include the construction of certain criteria of authenticity. Thus, the tourist experience of the landscape is always a result of the work of making that landscape (even if that result is neither predictable nor uniform). This is the landscape as a piece of work, the product of the labour on the land.

Second, Mitchell points out that landscapes also influence our experiences based on their physical and conceptual qualities. They tend towards certain outcomes and reinforce particular ways of seeing the world. As we know, fences, sightlines and walking paths shape what kind of experience people have in a particular landscape. These aspects of the landscape work to produce those experiences (even as they often fail). Similarly, the efforts of destination management organizations to brand destinations work to shape the way tourists encounter the landscape (e.g. Nelson, 2015; Richards, 2020). These brands, as we know, are never simply innocent marketing tools, as they pave over conflicts and alternative ways of seeing that place (Fitchett et al., 2021; Young and Markham, 2020). Mobilization of authenticity is one aspect of many DMOs brands, and as such, authenticity works to shape the experience of the tourist (Werry, 2011).

Thus, we see that tourism operators often approach the question of authenticity as a piece of work that they need to highlight, produce or battle against. For example, the Journey to Churchill is a redesign of the zoo's previous polar bear enclosures that the zoo had previously. Many of the elements of the new design, including the connection to Churchill, are meant to mimic aspects of the northern habitat. Tourists, on the other hand, would seem to experience authenticity as something that does work within their tourist experience. However, as we will show from our interviews with polar bear tourists, authenticity was often something that they constructed from their experience.

## **Wildness and wildlife tourism**

This discussion of authenticity gets complicated within the context of wildness and wildlife. The academic literature understands nature, wildlife and our conceptions of wildness as products of their surrounding 'relationships mediated by their times, histories and localities' (Peluso, 2012: 79). Society and nature are 'always co-created' (Peluso, 2012: 81), and they change with environments and ideology. Following Cronon's (1996) influential work on the culture of nature, many researchers considering the relationship between nature and tourism have illustrated how ideas about nature are shaped by gender, race, colonialism, religion, class and location, among other things (Braun 2002; Thorpe 2012; Rutherford, 2011; Werry, 2011). Importantly, these ideas about nature have influence outside of the natural world. As Cronon (1996) argues, this hegemonic (and Western) version of nature suggests that wilderness is the 'ultimate landscape of authenticity' (p. 16) and perceives people as being outside or separate from nature. This sets up

a two-tiered approach, in which that nature which is truly authentic is the real nature worth protecting while the in-authentic nature is not as valued. This dualistic perspective can be problematic: a tree in an 'untouched' forest is no more authentic than the one in our backyard (Cronon, 1996). The dualistic view of nature extends to how we perceive wild and captive or tame animals (Collard, 2014), as illustrated by the question implicitly posed by Leanne, the zoo visitor quoted at the start of this paper: is a captive polar bear not a 'real' polar bear because its spatial circumstances have changed?

The discussion of authenticity within nature poses some challenges for our understanding of authenticity in tourism, especially since so many tourist experiences depend upon an idealized natural world to assert their authenticity (Vidon, 2017; Werry, 2011). Wilderness, as commonly mobilized in tourist discourses, is believed to be the opposite of the artificial (Price, 2000). Yet, at the same time, these experiences, as per Mitchell's understanding of landscape, are highly curated. Even when they operate within relatively unmodified landscapes, the social discourse of wilderness provides a lens which achieves a similar curatorial practice. Thus, when Braun (2002) examines the practices of a kayak trip in Clayoquot Sound on the west coast of Canada, he notices how the experience is structured to fulfill the desire to encounter an authentic wilderness. Indeed, these kinds of experiences are folded into conservation discourses, especially within the context of ecotourism, where these landscapes are illustrations of the spaces we need to conserve.

Like wilderness, wildness has become dichotomized and romanticized in our current cultural framework (Collard, 2014; Cronon, 1996). The distinction between wilderness, which is often equated to 'an impossible pure Nature', and wildness, which 'refers to the autonomy, otherness, and sentience of animals' (Collard et al., 2015: 328) becomes meaningful when thinking about animals. Expanding on this, we seek a more encompassing understanding of wildness and follow the work of Cronon (1995), Rutherford (2011) and Collard (2013) who advocate for 'honoring the wild' as 'learning to remember and acknowledge the autonomy of the other' (Cronon, 1995: 25). We return to this question of wildness at the conclusion of the paper to suggest further areas of research.

## **Churchill, Manitoba: In situ polar bear experiences**

Churchill, Manitoba is known as the 'polar bear capital of the world' and claims to be the best place in the world to have a close encounter with polar bears (Dawson et al., 2010; Lemelin, 2006; Town of Churchill, 2018). This is largely a result of two factors: the town is situated on the migratory path of polar bears as they wait for the winter ice to form on Hudson Bay and it has both a commercial airport and a rail line enabling ready, if expensive, access to this remote community. Typically, the majority of visitors during polar bear season (October – November) are international visitors due to the high cost associated with travel during this time (Dawson et al., 2010).

The most common way for visitors to view polar bears is by booking a tour on very large custom-built vehicles with oversized tires (to minimize the impact on the Tundra) and a raised platform (to ensure the polar bears cannot get into the vehicles) (see Figure 1). These Polar Rovers or Tundra Buggies, depending on the tour company, can hold about 40 passengers and include washrooms and floorboard heaters (see Figure 2). These vehicles lumber at a slow pace through the Churchill Wildlife



**Figure 1.** Vehicles used for polar bear viewing in Churchill, Manitoba.  
Source: Photo credit: Jill Bueddefeld.



**Figure 2.** Iconic image of getting close to polar bears in Churchill, Manitoba (Frontiers North, 2018).

Management Area, 20 km outside of Churchill, stopping to allow picture taking if a polar bear is sighted. Some tours have knowledgeable guides or even polar bear scientists available to answer questions.

A less formal tour option is through local operators or taxi drivers who do not have permits to enter the Churchill Wildlife Management Area and who drive their vehicles on access roads or on private lands where polar bear sightings are frequent. The most exclusive experiences include staying in the heart of polar bear country on tundra vehicles with sleeping cars set up in the Churchill Wildlife Management area or flying from Churchill to one of the remote wilderness lodges which are surrounded by an electric fence. At these lodges, tourists are taken on walking tours across the taiga with armed guards on the lookout for polar bears. Often those tours end up within 300–500 m of polar bears.

Churchill's economy has, over the past 40 years, grown to rely increasingly on tourism, with polar bears as the main draw (a summer beluga season is growing). Through both their interactions with local inhabitants and the tourism economy's reliance on them, polar bears have become a central feature of the town's identity (Archibald, 2017; Struzik, 2014). Indeed, after a number of orphaned polar bear cubs were taken during the early 2010s, many residents objected to the bears being 'stolen' from the area and caged in a zoo (Dacey, 2017).

## **The journey to Churchill exhibit: Ex situ polar bear experiences**

The Assiniboine Park Zoo exhibit called *Journey to Churchill* opened in 2014 with the intention of replicating aspects of the landscape, wildlife and townscape found in and around Churchill (Assiniboine Park Zoo, 2016). This exhibit was built both to make Churchill accessible to the average Manitoban who may never be able to visit the northern community and to act as a centre for polar bear conservation and research (Assiniboine Park Zoo, 2016). Provincial funding for the zoo was ensured through the Polar Bear Protection Act to enhance the public's understanding of polar bears and the challenges they face from climate change.

The highlight of the exhibit is the 'Gateway to the Arctic' building (see Figure 3 for a map of the exhibit) which features large glass walls and an underwater tunnel viewing area where visitors can see polar bears swimming and sometimes catching fish to eat or watching seals in an adjacent enclosure (see Figure 2). The immersive encounter is an icon for the exhibit and is certainly the most popular space within the entire zoo. Next to the underwater polar bear enclosure is a tank containing seals, and frequently polar bears are seen watching the seals as they swim past on the other side of the tunnel.

Visitors have the option of subsequently entering the Leatherdale International Polar Bear Conservation Centre (LIPBCC) which focusses on the science surrounding polar bears including biology, habitat and the influence of climate change and how they are being researched and protected. This conservation message is central to the role that the Zoo has been given by the Provincial government to educate the public to help protect polar bears in the future. The final part of the exhibit is the 'Churchill Coast', featuring



Figure 3. The Journey to Churchill exhibit at the Assiniboine Park Zoo.  
Source: Photo credit: Jill Bueddefeld.



elements of the town of Churchill, such as the Tundra Grill (the Tundra Inn and Grill is one of a handful of restaurants in Churchill, Manitoba).

## Methods

As settler-scholars we acknowledge that this research takes place within this lens and on Treaty One Territory, on original lands of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples and on the homeland of the Métis Nation. This research follows the work of Cohen and Cohen (2017), Cohen (2007) and Lovell and Bull (2017) who suggest that Wang's (1999) constructive type of authenticity is more appropriately conceptualized as the process of the social construction of objective and existential authenticity. Therefore, this research takes a constructivist approach to understanding object-based forms of authenticity in wildlife tourism.

This research is part of a larger longitudinal multi-site case study that explored different types of visitor learning, discourses of authenticity and sustainable behaviour change outcomes among polar bear tourists (Bueddefeld, 2019; Bueddefeld and Benbow, 2021; Bueddefeld et al., 2018). The methods used in this study included on-site observations, personal meaning maps (PMMs), open-ended interviews as well as follow-up personal meaning maps and open-ended interviews completed by telephone and Skype.

In total, 30 participants in Churchill, Manitoba (in situ) and 27 at the Assiniboine Park Zoo (ex situ) participated in the study. PMMs ask participants to write or draw any words, phrases or images that relate to their understanding of their experience during the visit (Falk and Dierking, 2000; Falk et al., 1998; Van Winkle and Falk, 2015). The PMM is then emailed to participants two to three months later and participants are asked to re-examine their PMM and make any additions, corrections or changes to their meaning maps. The follow-up interviews were found to be informative in understanding visitors' perceptions relating to authenticity, as the off-site interviews allowed participants to provide less hurried and more thoughtful responses compared to the on-site interviews, which were often rushed due to the nature of the visitors' experiences.

All data, both PMMs and interview questions, were transcribed and coded inductively for in-vivo examples of responses related to authenticity using NVivo software. After the initial phase of coding, the data coded as relating to 'authenticity' was further examined for emerging themes and patterns. The emerging themes resulting from this analysis will be discussed in turn, in relation to the perceived authenticity of the polar bears: wildness and danger, wildness and play and the embodiment of the encounter. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and are used throughout this paper.

## Real bears, wild bears and zoo bears

Based on nature-based tourism research on authenticity (Knudsen et al., 2016; Vidon, 2017), it was anticipated that visitors would discuss the authenticity of the place of their encounter; was the zoo experience (ex situ) or the Churchill experience (in situ) believed to be more authentic? Another anticipated discussion involved the existential authenticity of visitors' experiences with emphasis on finding their authentic selves through a nature-based tourism experience, as has been a current theme in recent nature-based

tourism authenticity research (Knudsen et al., 2016; Vidon, 2017). While some responses did relate to this existential authenticity, a more prominent theme emerged through the inductive in vivo coding process which found that visitors' discourses focussed on the authenticity of the polar bears themselves. As in the opening quotation from Leanne, zoo bears are not considered to be 'real bears'; only the wild bears are seen as real. Rachel, another visitor, described them as 'two different bears'. At the zoo 'are the happy bears, they're-they're fed, they're playful they're-they're not what I would expect to see up there [in Churchill]. Up there I would see more of a hunter and you know protective, um, you know, fighting with each other'.

Similarly, Patty, a regular zoo visitor to the zoo, compared her zoo experience with going to see polar bears in Churchill: 'Just, you know, that whole sense of wild and control. . . Whereas when you're out on the Tundra and yes, you may be in a Tundra Buggy, but those animals are wild right there. You're visiting their habitat'. For Patty, the difference is the ability of the wild bears to control their lives, their movement and how visitors experience them. Wildness, then, is associated with the ability to make decisions of sentience, of choice and ultimately control. Whereas zoo bears may have some choice and control in what they do, where they go (within the extent of the 10-acre exhibit) and which other bears they interact with, the loss of control due to their captive boundaries is what ultimately matters to some visitors in their perception of polar bears' wildness.

The sentiment that polar bears in the zoo are not real or wild bears was also elaborated upon by Vincent, a visitor on a tour at the zoo, who explained:

In the zoo, like, I mean you're close enough, so you can see them interacting, but there's the-the danger aspect is completely gone. So, *there's no sense of them being wild animals* that you have to uh respect the fact that they are wild and that they are, you know, um carnivores. So, it's-it's one of those things that, yeah, it's-it's-it's a-a very, um. . . yeah, I guess hygienic look, by the zoo. (Emphasis added)

There was even a distinction provided between the types of trips offered in Churchill based upon the perceived danger. Mitchell, a participant who did a walking tour outside of Churchill, described being charged by a polar bear and how this element of danger made the experience more authentic than seeing polar bears from a Tundra Buggy. When asked what his most significant experience was, Mitchell replied, 'The most significant. Bit of an angry bear, well no, it was a bear getting chased close to us'. In his follow up interview, he said that being on the ground with the bears 'feels very different than being 6–8–10 ft. above them looking down' (though he had no experience of being on the tundra vehicles). Similarly, Victor, who had just returned from a remote lodge several hours by airplane north of Churchill, felt that Churchill was a tourist town:

Victor: Um, I would not go on one of these tours here in Churchill, to see the bears. I don't like - I think that's kind of a fake way of seeing bears.

Researcher: Right.

Victor: But it's good for the city [Churchill] of course. It keeps the economy going. But I - I kind of wanted to see them a little different, out in mother nature. And maybe they are still out

in mother nature here, but it's not the same to sit on one of those big, whatever they are called, Tundra Buggies I think they're called. That's not the way I - I like to see the polar bear.

Researcher: Right. So, seeing them from the lodge with the fence around you, you felt was a better experience?

Victor: Yeah. And we were also outside the fence. We would walk and there would be two guys with guns, not to kill the polar bears, but just to fire if one came too close.

In many ways, these examples express the modern version of Evelyn Waugh's famous quip, 'the tourist is the other fellow', where each visitor's experience confirms their belief in the authenticity of the tour they embarked on. Yet, the fact that zoo visitors felt, at times, that other experiences – ones they had not yet been on – were more real, suggests a more widely held conception of the bears of Manitoba which categorizes them into three broad types: Zoo Bears that are imitations of their non-captive cousins; Real Bears on the shores of Hudson Bay that can be seen relatively easily from tundra vehicles; and Wild Bears that are seen in their own habitat through walking tours. These 'types' of bears aid in the exploration of visitors' experience of authenticity and learning by enhancing understanding of how their connections with the polar bears derived from the ability to perceive the bears as 'real'. Below, we outline several conditions that influenced the degree to which bears were interpreted as being authentic, whether in the zoo or in Churchill. The implications for these findings are discussed subsequently.

## **Energetic conditions of living: Danger**

For many participants, the idea of what makes a bear wild was closely associated with the recognition that the bears are dangerous predators. As we saw above, both Vincent and Mitchell described the ability to be dangerous as a key quality of a more authentic bear and this was echoed by both zoo and Churchill visitors. Francine demonstrates this with her response to the question about how the zoo visit compared with how she imagined seeing polar bears in Churchill:

Um. . . I don't know. I think it would – well, obviously it would be very different because they're in their natural habitat, right? Um, and then once they found out that we're like a meal to them. I'd be keeping my distance [laughs].

When Vincent describes the zoo as hygienic (above), he implies that the wild is messier and less controlled, but he also suggests that in a zoo you do not have to act in a way that respects potential of danger from the bears. This lack of a zoo bear to be able to demand respect implies that the site itself has created inauthentic bears.

Zoo bears were also believed to be less authentic because they were not themselves in danger. For example, Martin, a Churchill visitor, made the observation that in Churchill 'You can feel the um, polar bear's power, let's say uh, when you have a mother and a cub and a big male comes in, they definitely run like hell'. For Martin, zoo bears were safe, not exposed to the reality of polar bear lives. He later explained, 'You can see lean polar bears [in Churchill], well, usually in the zoo they are kind of fat. Similarly, Cassandra



**Figure 4.** Children viewing polar bears at the Tundra Grill in the Journey to Churchill exhibit, at the Assiniboine Park Zoo (2018).

Photo credit: Jill Blueddefeld.

viewed the bears in the zoo as less authentic because of their energy: ‘Compared to seeing them out on the Tundra, as we’ve seen them here. They [the bears in the zoo] were docile. They were, like I said, just lethargic, sleeping, just not moving around at all. I mean we didn’t see them moving at all’.

Interestingly, zoo bears regained some of their wildness through the eyes of child visitors. The Tundra Grill, in the Journey to Churchill exhibit at the Assiniboine Park Zoo, is directly adjacent to the polar bear enclosure. The two are separated by floor to ceiling windows, with the polar bear enclosure approximately five feet lower than the floor of the Grill, so if polar bears are sleeping or walking directly below the windows they cannot be seen until they stand up against the window or move into view (see Figure 4). Small children seem to be drawn to walk along the low windowsill and are often unaware

that there might be polar bears directly below them. When the polar bears stand up, the children are startled and often cry, believing they are in danger. After some assurance from adults most children eventually go closer to the glass to see the polar bears, but some children cannot get over their fear of the bears and refuse to get a closer look. Patty described this experience with her grand-niece Susie: ‘. . . Susie’s reaction to the bears and how the glass felt like it wasn’t there to her. She didn’t want to step on that ledge and get next to the window’. For Patty, this was a significant part of her visit, as seeing the polar bears through the eyes of her grand-niece made her see the animals from a different perspective, as potentially dangerous animals.

In this example, the perception of the zoo bears as dangerous predators comes not from the experience or condition of their habitat, but through the misrecognition by children. This illustrates how, at times, the conditions of authenticity of the bear are predicated upon visitor perception rather than the actual ability or inability of the bear to be dangerous.

### **Subjective conditions of living: Play**

Zoo polar bears were also seen to be more authentic when visitors watched polar bears at play and observed the freedom associated with play. Dianne described how the polar bears at play surprised her:

Seeing the polar bears play was something. . . . I don’t think I ever thought much about how polar bears play cause we never get to see that in anything, even in documentaries.

Dianne recognized that the behaviours she has seen of polar bears have either come from her experiences at the zoo or from documentaries. Witnessing them play opened up a new way of seeing the bears.

APZ 26: (Dianne)

He just, he-he looked like he was having fun floating and, you know, doing the things that you would see children do in a. I think that was a very unique experience. Being able to stand there and look into that glass and the water and uh, you know, I remember the squeals of delight of the children.

Susan, also a zoo visitor, felt that watching the polar bears playing in the underwater enclosure made her feel that the polar bears were able to act like ‘themselves’, like they were not captive.

You know jumping in the pool and coming out and shaking themselves like, you know, like dogs shake themselves and-and just like kind of like the fun little intimate things, you know?. . . . To see them swim, that was so important. . . . Like swimming around and frolicking and twisting and turning and-and it just enjoying their bodies and enjoying their moment. . . . That-that was a thrill for me. I felt like they were able, they were able to be themselves.

In these two examples, play is considered as a way to recognize a bear as real or behaving in a positive way. Susan later reflects on the idea that the zoo bears may be

more able to play than the bears in Churchill because they do not have to look for food or worry about survival. She also reflects that their playfulness and movement shows her they are more ‘themselves’ which, she continues to explain, means not captive – or, in other words, wild.

The ability to see bears play was noted by several zoo visitors and Churchill tourists as a way to better understand the bears. For Natalie, watching the bears play in the zoo allowed for a new appreciation. ‘It was amusing and it was um. . . but also like they’re so - they’re so big. So, in some ways it was - I don’t know, I wouldn’t say scary, but you could kind of just appreciate how, yeah, how big these animals are and how strong they are, but then also how playful they are’.

### **Embodiment of the encounter: Space**

Another element affecting the authenticity of polar bear experiences for visitors was their literal gaze. Tourism research typically focusses on the figurate aspect of the tourist gaze – the way we make meaning through the act of seeing and experiencing (Lemelin, 2006; Tribe, 2006). In this research visitors were found to make an association between the authenticity of their experience and their literal gaze, in terms of their vantage point and ability to look the polar bears in the eyes.

When asked to reflect on his most significant experience in Churchill, Mitchell, the participant who went on a polar bear walking tour, felt that seeing polar bears at eye level was superior and more authentic than looking down on them from a large vehicle. ‘The realism of the experience we had with polar bears, because we were on foot. Just being, actually on foot with them, was amazing. . . It felt a bit more real’ (Mitchell). As we have seen, other visitors to the remote lodges ascribed more authenticity to seeing polar bears in remote locations than to seeing them near the townsite.<sup>1</sup> The farther the visitor had to travel, the more authentic the experience was perceived to be.

While zoo visitors didn’t travel far, the ability to view polar bears from unique perspectives allowed them to see polar bears as more ‘real’. Ruth describes how seeing the polar bears swimming underwater helped her feel connected to them: ‘Yeah, I had to say the thing that sort of stands out in my mind is the-the swimming area for the polar bears. . . Um I-I just, I think it brings uh a connection, you know, I think sometimes in our modern world we-we tend to disconnect ourselves from the natural environment and uh to our, to our detriment’. This experience is common for many visitors to the zoo, especially in areas where they are allowed to get close or unique views of the bears. Visitors are often seen gleefully attempting to interact with the polar bears by placing their hands on the tunnel glass next to the polar bear’s paws. Susan, who had been to both Churchill and the Assiniboine Park Zoo, favourably compared the experience of seeing the bears in the underwater tunnels at the Zoo to the ‘visceral experience’ she had had, seeing them in Churchill:

I think it’s the visceral experience, the bears, in a way that you can’t experience them when you’re in an artificial environment or when you’re online. . . On the other hand, the very cool part about the zoo was that, the day that we were there, we were able to spend almost an hour watching two bears at play in a pool of water. And so, being able to see them from under the

water. . . And being in, watching them swim and engage with one another and fight over a rope, and, and interact.

The unique underwater perspective was important in allowing Susan to perceive them as authentic, like their wild counterparts.

## **Discussion: Creating the conditions for caring in the Anthropocene**

As becomes clear from the social nature literature (Castree and Braun, 2001), although participants in this research attributed different degrees of authenticity to different bears, there is no objective authenticity to our nature experiences. We know that nature itself does not exist as a stand-alone category of existence; while species and objects that we define as part of nature exist, the grouping of these objects together under the banner of ‘nature’ is a product of the social sphere. Thus we are left with no benchmark for what is objectively authentic about our experiences of nature. At best we are dealing with experiences that conform to pre-existing culturally specific beliefs (which are often unacknowledged) about what nature is. Nature then becomes a powerful discourse that justifies certain experiences because of its shared meanings, even as those meanings are obfuscated by the denial of nature as a social construction.

In their analysis of the experience of wilderness in the Adirondack Park in New York State, Vidon et al. (2018) suggest that many users of the park seek out wilderness as a form of authentic experience, even as they know it is a constructed experience. They conclude that ‘nature tourists, while intellectually understanding and recognizing that the wilderness they are visiting is *not* the pristine, authentic wilderness constructed and held up in poetry, painting, and prose, nevertheless experience it in meaningful and abiding ways’ (Vidon et al, 2018: 69). Authenticity, in this instance, is a type of fantasy that is engaged in, and almost accepted, by the tourist in ways that enhance and deepen the experience. A similar thing occurs within polar bear tourism, where tourists will make meaning, significant deep meaning at times, from a situation which they recognize is not entirely authentic even as their meaning is built, in part, on that fantasy of authenticity.

When we understand authenticity to exist as the kind of fantasy that Vidon et al. (2018) suggest, it requires thinking about the work that the fantasy does for the subject itself. In some cases, we can see authenticity working as a form of distinction for the tourist, asserting a level of quality of the experience that the tourist believes they got from that experience. So, when Victor (quoted above) dismisses the Tundra buggy tours in Churchill as ‘a fake way of seeing bears’, he was also asserting the distinction that he wanted to see from his choice of tours. This type of distinction is well recognized in the tourist industry and is heavily drawn upon by those tours that do provide this level of interaction with polar bears – the remote tour that he did go on calls themselves ‘The World’s Next Great Safari’. Other participants reflected upon the authenticity of the bears, not to judge the quality of the experience, but to build their concern for the animals themselves.

But we are also required to think about the work that authenticity does on a scale larger than just the individual experience. The establishment of three scales of polar bear

authenticity – Zoo Bears, Real Bears and Wild bears as we are calling them – helps make sense, not just of polar bears and their place within a drastically changing world, but also the frame of those changes. The social nature literature helps us here, but it also points to an important contradiction by illustrating a number of the dangers of believing in an authentic nature, the most significant of which is the way that ‘authentic nature’ is often defined in opposition to human culture, such that humans are not seen to be a part of nature. In the context of the Anthropocene, in which human influence over the non-human world is profound, such a view of nature leaves us with little room to respond (Buscher and Fletcher, 2020).

## Conclusion

In their ‘Manifesto for Abundant Futures’, Collard et al. (2015) contemplate what a turn towards the Anthropocene means for conservation. One approach adopted by conservation groups accepts the premise of the social construction of nature, and is referred to as the ‘postnatural’ approach (see also Buscher and Fletcher, 2020). These conservation groups follow the path of the social construction of nature literature to suggest that nature can no longer be considered to have a plausible baseline to return to. The objective of conservation under this approach is not to return nature to its untouched past, but to create new conditions in which humans and nature can flourish, often, as Collard et al. (2015) point out, within the confines of a capitalist system.

In opposition to the postnatural turn that focusses on capitalist conservation methods, Collard et al. (2015) propose three strategies for enacting conservation within a social nature framework that will lead towards abundant futures. One of these, ‘Recognizing Animal Autonomy’ is directly relevant to the question of authenticity in polar bear tourism. This strategy is a request to redefine wildness so that we can incorporate multispecies entanglements within our environmental ethics. They write: ‘The degree to which an animal is wild thus has little to do with its proximities to humans and everything to do with the conditions of living, such as spatial (can the animal come and go), subjective (can the animal express itself), energetic (can the animal work for itself) and social (can the animal form social networks). These are conditions of possibility, of potential, not forced states of being’ (Collard et al, 2015: 328). In many ways, these map on to the categories that enable visitors to see polar bears as authentic: the capability to be dangerous reflects their energetic condition; the ability to play reflects their subjective and social conditions; the ability to see the bears in a unique way reflects their spatial conditions. These conditions, of course, are not necessarily reflective of the actual condition of the bears, but rather of how the visitor perceives them.

When dealing with polar bears, which have been adopted as an icon for the climate change movement (Born, 2019), zoos and tourist organization must address the question of conservation. The ability to encourage a connection to the bears is seen as key to both happy consumers and potential learning. The conditions, therefore, that set up a more ‘authentic’ bear outlined above (danger, play and unique interaction) are all very specifically designed into the experience of polar bear viewing. The zoo has consciously set up the exhibit to make these conditions available to the bears, or to provide visitors with the perception of them. Similarly, the tourist experiences in and around Churchill are



designed to provide an experience that the tourist believes provides them with a close encounter with a real bear, living in the wild.

The question then arises, how authenticity, as perceived by the tourist, impacts their interest in conservation and inspires them to change their behaviour to the benefit of polar bears. This question is vital to understanding both the work of the Zoo and the tourist experience in Churchill. The Zoo itself has a mandate to encourage the protection of polar bears and many of the tourist companies in Churchill reflect the need to provide education and protection for polar bears. In addressing this question, we suggest that not only is it important to consider the learning of the tourists, but also to reflect on the ways in which the experiences are tied to the larger trend of postnatural conservation, which has a growing debate attached to it (Buscher and Fletcher, 2020; Collard et al., 2015).


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### Note

1. It is worth noting here that early polar bear tours in Churchill took place at the town dump where bears would gather to scavenge food. This practice was frowned upon by many and eventually the town removed the dump and tours moved to the Churchill Wildlife Management Area (Struzik, 2014).

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