

## Polar Bear Habitat opens itself to global audience

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COCHRANE - The eyes of the world were on some of Cochrane's cuddliest residents last week as the town's Polar Bear Habitat live-streamed Ganuk and Henry's antics to celebrate Polar Bear Week.

People from all over the world, as far-flung from Cochrane as Turkey and Sweden, tuned in online to watch the animals eat, play and enjoy what the habitat manager says is now the largest human-care facility for polar bears in the world.

"The cameras and the live-streaming is great, it opens up an audience not just for the bears but for Cochrane and it shows that there's this incredible natural environment they have here," explained manager Karen Cummings. "People are worried if they are looked after well, if they have the space they need, if they have an enriching life and by sharing this live feed with the world, it shows that we are meeting that new standard."

As well as showing viewers what the bears are up to, the cameras also give the animal keepers at the site the ability to keep tabs on the bears much easier.

"It was neat to showcase what we can offer to captive bears that most facilities aren't able to do," said Dylan McCart, conservation coordinator at the Polar Bear Habitat. "The cameras are great. At first, I think it was more or less for the public to see what the bears were doing but now, all the animal care staff are able to utilize the cameras to see what the bears are doing without physically interacting with them or altering what they are doing by having our presence there — which is really beneficial to us."

This has been especially helpful now that the 13-acre enclosure has been expanded to include a large lake that is 72-feet-deep.

As well as keeping tabs on the bears while they are on land, there are also cameras set up that can show what the bears are doing when they are submerged to a depth of about two feet below the surface.

"We see that they are staying under the water for an unbelievable amount of time, just swimming under water," said Cummings. "I actually had no idea that they would swim like what they do, looking like porpoises in the water — I thought they'd like, dog paddle."

The cameras have also helped to monitor how things have been going since Henry and Ganuk began living together in the same enclosure.

Ganuk has been with the Habitat for several years while Henry was acquired by the Habitat in October 2015 from a facility in Australia.

The two bears were recently moved into the same enclosure and have been cohabiting there since the spring.

"It's been spectacular," Cummings said of bringing the two animals together. "They do have their days, just like siblings have their days, and that's probably the best analogy: They're like bros who have their tiffs."

She also said that watching the two bears interact has helped the staff better understand how polar bears communicate and what certain actions and sounds mean.

"You can't really communicate with a polar bear and know what he's saying back to you as a person," Cummings explained. "But, when you see two polar bears interacting with each other you see, OK, he physically did this and then the other one reacted in that way. So, you can tell what they are actually saying to each other and that has been unbelievably helpful."

While he wasn't the star of the show on Thursday, the Habitat's other resident, Inukshuk, is also doing well, Cummings added.

Cochrane Mayor Peter Politis, who attended the Habitat on the day of the live-stream, said the venture has been a "wonderfully unexpected" success for the Town of Cochrane.

"We started this venture just a little more than a decade ago and it was a very big challenge for a small community our size to go down that road, many didn't think that it was going to be successful," he admitted. "But, we've come to the point now where we're the largest natural habitat for polar bears in the entire world, the only camp to have a facility dedicated to polar bears in the entire world, right here in Cochrane. This is a testament to us as Northerners in the region and how we come together and pull these wonderful experiences off."

Representatives from TransCanada Pipeline were also in attendance on Thursday, where they donated a pickup truck to the habitat to help make the staff's jobs a little easier.

Cummings said there are a number of initiatives on the forefront for the Habitat now, as well.

For example, thanks to the live camera feed of the polar bears, programs have been developed where researchers and students from around the world can now study behavioural patterns of the polar bears via the Cochrane facility.

"We have some applications out for an education expansion to offer camps here in the summer and winter," Cummings added. "It would be on environmental topics and research topics, we're hoping to be able to give an overview to young people in Grade 6 to Grade 8 on the skills they need to learn about data collection for climate change."

If the application is successful, the Habitat will be partnering with the Ininev Friendship Centre to engage the First Nations communities in the program, as well.

The habitat is also expanding its educational courses to offer programs on climate change where students in James Bay will actually measure the effects of climate change and incorporate it into GIS map systems.

The live cams can be viewed by visiting the Polar Bear Habitat website at <http://polarbearhabitat.ca/watch-live/> or the Earth Cam website at <http://www.earthcam.com/world/canada/cochrane/polarbear/?cam=hectorlake>