



Polar bears love sea ice – it is their home, playground and pathway. PHOTOS: RAHUL S. VERGHESSE

Rahul S. Verghese

SVALBARD, Norway – I am the king of all I survey, at the top of the world in the North Pole, at the top of the food chain.

Humans come from far-off lands to shoot me, with their cameras and long lenses. They get very excited when they see me and try to be quiet, but are not.

They do not realise that I have sensed their presence, smelling them from kilometres away. They may know that I am not interested in them since they do not have much blubber, and that I prefer solitude.

I will tell you a little more about myself and my extended family. We live across five lands within the Arctic Circle – Siberia in Russia, Alaska in the United States, Canada, Greenland and Svalbard in Norway.

We love sea ice because it is a food ecosystem, lets us travel long distances and is our playground.

When we go farther towards the North Pole, our stock of food dries up because there is less and less life as we get away from the edges of the sea ice.

For us, the sea ice and pack ice are our homes and our “ships” that take us out to our favourite waters in early spring.

There is plankton in the pack ice – seals feed on that, and we love seal blubber. That is our favourite food, and we hang out around the holes in the pack ice waiting for seals to surface. We are normally successful in only 2 to 3 per cent of our seal hunts.

We need a lot of blubber. We bulk up in summer as we get ready for our low activity and low food supply in winter. Males can get to

around 800kg and may be twice as big as an average female.

We love walrus blubber too. But when walruses congregate in large groups, we stay away from their long tusks that can injure us.

Reindeer and other animals are less interesting since they do not have much blubber but, nowadays, we cannot afford to be too picky.

Also, we are solitary creatures, never really seeing our dads and spending the first few years with our mums who feed, protect and teach us to hunt. And then we are on our own.

I live in the pack ice around the archipelago of Svalbard in the Barents Sea, which brings in the warm currents of the Gulf Stream. With these currents come the whales in the late spring and summer. They go down to the Caribbean to party and calve in summer.

I like to see these big guys, and I know they have tons of blubber, but I have never been able to eat whale meat.

I was told that the Dutchman William Barents “discovered” Svalbard around 1596 as he was looking for the north-east shipping passage to China. He did not know that the Inuits and polar bears had discovered Svalbard long before that.

Recently, I came upon the diary of a human when I was out on a stroll.

He had come on a wildlife trip by sea to my area in Svalbard. He and his fellow expedition members on their ship were so excited, not just about me, but also about the walruses, eiders, puffins, whales, Arctic foxes and Svalbard reindeer.

They were also concerned about the diminishing pack ice, and that got me to delve into the man’s diary entries in May 2023.

MAY 4, KENNEDY BAY

“We were alerted, while on our small ship of 51 passengers, about a polar bear sighting a few kilometres out. We ran up to the observation deck, each with a camera or zoom lens or just keen eyes trying to focus on a moving white figure, under the bluish white icefall close to where the glacier met the water.

“And then a hush, as one after the other, we spotted the majestic polar bear casually strolling across the wide glacial expanse.

“We were mesmerised for over half an hour as the ship moved a little closer. Through our telephoto lenses, the bear was much clearer, ambling and seemingly oblivious to our group over a kilometre away.”

MAY 4, MAGDALENA FJORD

“Walruses in groups of twos and threes, and solitary in some cases, all relaxing on pack ice and floating around. They are literally chilling while our Zodiac inflatable boats got a little closer. With our zoom lenses, we felt like we were touching them and were able to do a dental examination of their tusks.

“These huge creatures seem so ungainly and slow in their movements on the ice, but so quick and agile once they slip into the water. Truly magnificent to spend a few hours on two Zodiac outings that day.”

MAY 5, OBSERVATION DECK OF M/S QUEST

“Another polar bear sighting and we rush up on deck of our ship, the M/S Quest. Many get to spot the polar bear through binoculars, as I

struggle to train my 400mm zoom in the direction that the others were excitedly pointing to, given the rolling of the ship.

“It is amazing how the guides from Polar Quest were able to spot this bear. My respect for their depth of knowledge of Arctic wildlife and their tracking abilities has multiplied.

“By the 1650s to 1680s, whaling companies had mushroomed, and there were around 10,000 whalers in Svalbard.

“Thousands of whales would be killed each year for their blubber, used for lighting lamps, cooking oil and fuel.

“Some of the meat was eaten, the rest was disposed of. The bays would be red with whale blood. Whales almost disappeared by the early 1800s and then the whalers moved elsewhere.”

MAY 6, OBSERVATION DECK OF M/S QUEST

“Shouts of ‘Minke whale! Minke whale!’ got us back on the observation deck of our ship. These whales are very shy and surface infrequently and we saw only their fins. But that was an exciting enough sight. These small baleen whales feed on krill and smaller fish, and head south in the Arctic winter.

“Arctic foxes are small foxes and have a white coat in winter. This sheds as they get a brown furry coat towards summer and early autumn, as a protective camouflage against the rocks, Arctic wolves, eagles and polar bears.

“These omnivores, like other Arctic species, bulk up to over 50 per cent of their weight towards the onset of winter, but do not hi-

Climate change is visibly impacting life in the Arctic Circle, and through that, affecting not only polar bears, but also all of humanity



GETTING THERE

I flew from Singapore to Warsaw on LOT Polish Airlines, which gave me a night in transit in the Polish capital. I got to experience Warsaw’s captivating Old Town, before flying on to Oslo.

My 10-day expedition in the Arctic Circle on the M/S Quest started and ended in Oslo, with eight days spent on the ship. The rates in 2024 would range from US\$8,000 (S\$10,800) to US\$12,000, depending on the cabin class.

The trip was organised by Ibex Expeditions. For more information, go to ibexexpeditions.com or e-mail ibex@ibexexpeditions.com

“Global warming, with a record low level of winter ice being reported the last few years, is alarming.

“Is it already too late?”

“Diminishing ice has reduced hunting and breeding grounds for polar bears, prompting them to enter towns and also to eat reindeer, which is not part of their normal diet.”

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

I just wish more humans will come and shoot us, but with their cameras, and document the beauty of our home. This protects our future as much as the future of the humans.

First, whales were decimated for their blubber. Now, our habitats, families and ecosystems are slowly but surely being depleted with climate change, and polar bears are being targeted even more by hunters.

Will human beings be next? I believe they are now feeling the impact of forest fires in the US, Australia and Europe.

They are experiencing heatwaves in China, India and now even in Singapore. Lands are being scorched in Africa, and Amazon rainforests are destroyed for short-term gain.

We all live on one planet and need it to be icy-cold in winter at the poles. Let us hope more human beings will visit us – and help us help humanity.

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• The writer runs an Olam venture in Singapore focused on healthy snack foods, seeking to make a difference with sustainable products.



It is challenging for polar bears to prey on walruses as they have long tusks and hang out in groups.



Expedition members on a trip to the Arctic Circle.