

Book Review

ON THIN ICE: THE CHANGING WORLD OF THE POLAR BEAR. Richard Ellis. Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, USA, and Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto Canada, 2009. ISBN 978-0-307-27059-7, 400 pp.

I love polar bears, but not as much as Richard Ellis. The amount of reading, researching, and compiling of reference material that went into crafting this book, as evidenced by a 27-page bibliography, is a declaration of true love. I was expecting a discussion of climate change and its impact on polar bears (which arrived about three quarters of the way through the book) and instead was regaled with stories of early Arctic exploration, the Europeans' first encounters with the ice bear, the political ramifications of treaties between polar nations, and the hunting prowess of the Inuit people. Each chapter stands alone and should be read that way (if read from cover to cover, some of the content can feel redundant). Numerous black-and-white photos and illustrations throughout the book serve to highlight the substance of each chapter. It's nice to see that Ellis, a renowned illustrator in his own right, even included a few of his own drawings. The book also includes an eight-page insert of gorgeous photographs in full color.

Ellis sets the tone of thoughtful research with his first chapter "Europeans 'Discover' the Polar Bear" as he chronicles stories of Dutch, German, British, and other European explorers' encounters with *Ursus maritimus*. Ellis fills the pages with snippets of ships' logs and crewmen's journals, describing harrowing voyages and wondrous encounters with polar bears, most resulting in the bear being mortally wounded. "The Great Ice Bear" is an accurate, thoughtful chapter on polar bear natural history and behavior and offers examples of the animal's strength and determination such as in this accounting from Russian biologist Nikita Ovsyanikov: "I once tracked a bear that had dragged the 660-pound carcass of a young walrus 495 feet across a gravel pit, then 990 feet through the ice and slush of a lagoon, and finally 165 feet up a 20-degree tundra slope" (p. 80).

By far the longest chapter (81 pages) is dedicated to the geography, history, and politics surrounding the "Polar Bear Nations"—those lands inhabited by the great white bear. Hunting quotas, scientific expeditions, and regulatory challenges are all covered as Ellis reports on each country where wild polar bears

reside. Some of the most sobering content describes a Danish study of polar bears in Greenland and the high concentrations of chemical pollutants and heavy metals found in the blubber of the polar bears. Just another example of how the future of the polar bear is indeed skating on thin ice.

Although it's clear Ellis does not feel a zoo is the best place for a polar bear, in the chapter "In the Zoo and at the Circus," he offers an unbiased treatment of the evolution of polar bears in captivity. He admits not everybody can see a bear in the wild and realizes that "the most impressive thing about polar bears, young or old, is their powerful presence, and nothing can communicate that as well as a real live bear" (p. 225). I was especially interested to read Ellis's recounting of the inhumane treatment of polar bears in the Mexican-based Suarez Brothers Circus, with the bears' confiscation in Puerto Rico and ultimate placement in U.S. zoos, since at the time, I was a polar bear keeper at one of the zoos which made a permanent home for the rescued bears. Unfortunately, Ellis seems to have missed an intriguing part of the story: The bears housed by the Suarez Brothers were the exact same bears he was describing earlier in the chapter when he wrote about the experiences of German animal trainer Ursula Bottcher, whose polar bear act was featured in several circuses in Europe as well as in the Ringling Brothers circus in the U.S.

I used to live in Minnesota, and as the ice formed on the lakes in early winter, I would brace myself for the stories of people falling through the ice. Although polar bears clearly don't mind a good dive through the ice, I was nevertheless filled with that same feeling of impending doom after reading the chapter "Global Warming and the Bear." Ellis clearly outlines the evidence of anthropogenic climate change and offers a well-researched look into why we should all be very afraid. Countless articles are referenced as evidence of melting ice caps and cracking ice shelves and the accelerated disappearance of suitable polar bear habitat. The final chapter of the book poses the question "Is the Polar Bear Doomed?" Unless we can overcome the short-sighted, greed-fueled destruction of the environment, the answer is tragically "YES."

Traci Belting
Curator of Mammals and Birds
Seattle Aquarium
Seattle, WA, USA