

## Polar Bears and Crude Oil Don't Mix

By Christopher Pollon

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*A polar bear walks past a group of tourists in Churchill, Man. The town on the shores of Hudson Bay sits on an annual migration route as bears gather along the coast, waiting for the sea ice to form. Once it does, they venture out onto the pack ice to hunt for seals, Oct. 24, 2022 (Photo by Daisy Gilardini)*

It's a Saturday night in Churchill, and the Seaport Hotel — the only bar open in late April, owned by Mayor Mike Spence — is completely dead.

Other than a few characters hunched over video lottery terminals, it's just me and former port worker Joe Stover. He tells me that back in 2016, just before he was laid off by the port's former American owners OmniTRAX, this place would have been "hopping."

Our server, Danielle Joseph, has lived in town for 16 years, including five years working at the port. She's proud that after more than 20 years of American control, the ownership is [now local](#).

But Joseph is also wary of the "endless cycle of hype" she has witnessed over the years concerning the port's expansion.

"And I do not support oil exports from Churchill either," she said flatly.



*A couple watches the northern lights display towards the end of Churchill's aurora tourist season, March 18, 2020  
(Source: Universal Images Group)*

It's a popular sentiment in this northern Manitoba port and tourist town of 850 people. But it flies in the face of a frenzy of development schemes swirling around Churchill since the election of Prime Minister Mark Carney and a focus on nation-building projects in response to a US-imposed trade war.

"Any oil spill could totally decimate our tourism industry," says tourism logistics coordinator Joe Stover.

Western premiers have pitched Hudson Bay as the terminus for bitumen exports through the Arctic — a new all-season road, a hub to extend hydro-grid power to the territory of Nunavut, and not least, an export point for a mineral-rich province that Manitoba Premier Wab Kinew has called the "Costco of Critical Minerals." Earlier this month, Kinew floated the idea of [oil shipments](#) via Hudson Bay.



*Aerial view of the Port of Churchill, Canada's only deepwater Arctic port connected to North America by rail.  
(Source: Arctic Gateway Group)*

Churchill, however, may find itself facing incompatible futures — a potential gateway to funnel western resources to non-US markets, expand resupply to remote communities, and bolster sovereignty in an ice-free Arctic. All of these would require a huge influx in shipping traffic and a surge in infrastructure building.

At the same time, it's [a remote town](#) that earns most of its income from an ecotourism industry dependent on a pristine, unpolluted habitat for polar bears, beluga whales and 200-plus migratory bird species.



*Joe Stover, a former port worker who now handles logistics for a Churchill tourism company. (Photo by Christopher Pollon)*

"Any oil spill could totally decimate our tourism industry," Stover said.

He is far from an environmentalist, but Stover said the inevitability of spills from increased ship traffic and hydrocarbon exports is a huge red flag.

"A question Churchill really needs to understand is, what is the backup plan?" asked Spence, who, in addition to owning this bar/motel, runs a tourism company and co-chairs the Arctic Gateway consortium of more than 40 Indigenous and bay-line communities that took over the port and railway in 2018.

"For some people, all their families ever did was work on the rail line and the port, he said.

"We are going to have to find a balance, because tourism isn't going to pay all the bills."

### **Bears and Whales**

Churchill is a global tourism destination known as the Polar Bear Capital of the World.



*The holy grail of Churchill tourist photos. A white polar bear in a field of fuchsia pink fireweed, (Photo courtesy of Churchill Wild/Dennis Fast)*

In 2023, [Churchill-bound tourism](#) contributed nearly \$100 million to the provincial economy, with more than \$21 million in tax revenue from some 25,000 visitors, many of them from the US, UK and Australia. Just under 1,400 full-time equivalent jobs were generated that year alone.

Glen Newstater works one of these jobs as a guide and logistics expert for one of the town's biggest tourism operators.



*Glen Newstater is a guide and logistics operator for Churchill Wild Polar Bear Tours (Photo by Christopher Pollon)*

He took me on a drive along the 25-kilometre stretch of road that is Churchill, to better understand how tourism currently shapes the town.

Driving along the frozen Hudson Bay coastline in late April, we pass the intact wreck of a ship called the *MV Ithaca*, and on a rocky beach near the airport, the remains of “Miss Piggy” — a cargo plane that crash-landed in 1979.

Both are famous local tourist sites, amazing to southerners because this far north the wrecks were not worth salvaging and have become permanent quirks of the landscape.



*The wreck of a C-46 “Commando” twin-prop cargo aircraft. Widely used by the US military during the Second World War, the plane crashed on Nov. 13, 1979 as it attempted to return to Churchill airport shortly after takeoff. The badly damaged plane is now a tourist attraction known as “Miss Piggy.” (Photo by Gordon Goldsborough)*

A big tourist draw is Churchill’s location beneath the [aurora oval](#), which makes the northern lights potentially observable for 300 nights a year.

But polar bears and beluga whales are by far the biggest attractions in the summer-fall tourist season, said Newstater, whose great-great-grandmother moved to Manitoba from Iceland with 11 children in tow. His great-grandfather moved to Churchill in 1930, lured by work at the newly built port.

Tourists can be classified by niche. Photographers are a “unique breed” and come from all over the world, said Christine Lee, Glen’s partner and general manager of the Blueberry Inn.

“Some will sit for eight hours in one place to get the perfect shot.”

Not to be outdone, birders show up armed with rare species bucket lists, memorizing bird call audio recordings in advance to better identify birds.



A street sign warns tourists they are in polar bear country (Photo by Christopher Pollon)

More than a dozen major tourism companies operate from the town, with some offering beluga whale tours at the nearby confluence of the Churchill River.

Spence's [Wat'chee Expeditions](#) is one of multiple [Indigenous-owned businesses](#) providing local cultural and historical context.

A handful of companies deliver high-end polar bear "safaris" — with their own remote lodges and attack-proof tundra buggies.

Spinoff industries include Indigenous and Inuit art, float plane services, restaurants, hotels, lodges and bars.



*Tourists look out of an Electric Vehicle (EV) Tundra Buggy near Churchill, Man. Frontiers North Adventures operates three EV Tundra Buggies and aims to transition its entire fleet to electric technology over time. The vehicles are used to explore the Churchill Wildlife Management Area, home to one of the world's largest concentrations of polar bears. Frontiers said the EVs offer "silent, zero-emission propulsion wildlife viewing experiences that leave a lighter footprint on this fragile ecosystem." (Source: Frontiers North Adventures)*

Americans accounted for more than [40 per cent of visitors](#) to Churchill in 2024, compared to 29 per cent from Canada. Has the US-led tariff war and strained diplomatic relations stemmed the flow of Americans to Canada's polar bear capital?

"No," said Newstater, noting that 65 per cent of his high-end, polar bear safari visitors are from south of the border.

"Americans see what they want to see," he said.

**Polar bears on thin ice?**

My April reporting trip coincided with a research visit by [Andrew Derocher](#), University of Alberta biological sciences professor and one of the world's preeminent polar bear researchers.



*Prof. Andrew Derocher with the paw of a 400 kg, adult male polar bear. The bear was tranquilized from a helicopter under a research permit and following approved methods consistent with the Canadian Council on Animal Care. Photo taken 60 kms northeast of Cape Churchill, Man., April 30, 2019. (Source: Andrew Derocher, University of Alberta)*

On the day we met to talk, he had about an hour of down-time before he boarded a helicopter with two graduate students to [tranquilize and tag polar bears](#) on the frozen Hudson Bay ice not far from town.

Derocher's research headquarters on the outskirts of Churchill is a tourist attraction in itself — the non-profit Churchill Northern [Studies Centre](#) was built over the remains of Canada's only rocket test site.

During the Cold War, the US and Canadian military fired rockets into the skies above the site in an effort to better understand the northern lights, a natural light display also known as the aurora borealis and caused by charged particles from the sun reaching the Earth's atmosphere.



*A rocket at the retired Churchill Rocket Research Range. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was suspected of somehow using the aurora borealis for advanced communications. In the early 1980s, [researchers fired rockets](#) into the northern lights to study its enormous electrical power. The surreal landscape of observation towers and rocket debris can still be seen years after the facility closed in 1985. (Photo by Christopher Pollon)*

The same loss of sea ice that is opening the north to shipping is putting the future of local polar bears into question, Derocher said.

That's because polar bears in this area spend all winter on the Hudson Bay ice hunting seals, their main source of sustenance. When the ice of Hudson Bay melts, they are forced onto land, where there is virtually nothing to eat.

"The [bear] population has declined by about 50 per cent in this area over the last few decades," he said. "So there's not as many as there used to be, but there's still at least 600 to 700 bears in the area."

The future of polar bears in this area is difficult to predict. "Churchill could have polar bears for another 100 years, or it could be just five years. It just depends on what happens to the sea ice," he said.



*A polar bear walks between patches of melting ice. (Source: Andrew Derocher)*

Is Derocher worried about the impact of an expanded shipping schedule on the polar bears?

"Let's say Churchill decides to ship bitumen from Alberta, and there was a big spill," he said.

"Based on where we know that polar bears are moving, how they move, with currents, with the sea ice drift relative to wind patterns, we can say, 'OK, we think the oil is here,'" he said.

"How many bears would be likely to move through that area? How many bears might we be looking at trying to clean up and rehabilitate?"

Research conducted in the 1980s, when there was interest in offshore oil and gas development in the Beaufort Sea, included experiments in Churchill that immersed live polar bears in oil and attempted to clean them.

"They died of kidney failure," Derocher said. "We know crude oil and polar bears don't mix."

What happens if there's an oil spill?

As Churchill pushes to expand shipping, what would happen if there was a big oil or diesel spill in Hudson Bay? That's the question being posed by the University of Manitoba's Churchill Marine Observatory, a new facility on the open coastline beside the port.

Exposed to the elements, it's the perfect place to conduct experiments to advance knowledge of how spilled fossil fuels interact with sea ice, the effect of contaminants on the ecosystem, and how potential spills could be cleaned up.

On an upper level are two open air pools containing water from the shipping lane — sucked in through an intake 600 feet out into the bay offshore. Both pools are under thick crusts of ice, and both have been thoroughly doused with diesel, simulating a spill. All data from the experimental tanks is relayed to the University of Manitoba.

"Churchill's growth will be powered by fossil fuels in multiple ways, for good and for ill," said University of Winnipeg professor Feiyue Wang, an expert on the dynamics of Hudson Bay ice and how to mitigate the risk of contaminants, who oversees the observatory from Winnipeg.

"Whenever you have shipping, there will always be the risk of oil spills," he said.

The spill risk is not just from potential oil exports via the port. Churchill is also a resupply launch pad for northern communities along the coast of Hudson Bay, where off-grid communities receive large shipments of fuels for electricity, heating and transport.

If there was ever a big spill in Hudson Bay, the first question is how would the world even find out about it? "Step one is detection of spills," said Wang.

Second is what are the ecosystem and societal impacts? Finally, how can a spill be mitigated?

"How would you physically recover spilled oil [potentially] with ice on the Bay and temperatures in the high minus 40s C before windchill?," Wang said.



*Cyril Fredlund (left) grew up in the bayside community of Whale Cove and works at the Churchill Marine Observatory. (Photo by Christopher Pollon)*

Cyril Fredlund, a technician at the observatory, is a native of Whale Cove, one of the communities with no road access located up the coast of Hudson Bay. I asked him would happen if there was a big oil spill?

“If it happens, we will do this research so we will know what happens,” he replied. “All the communities up the coast have a stake in this, because the ships will pass by them.”

### **Courtney knows the tourism score**

When I met Courtney Hooper, manager of the Arctic Trading Co. on Churchill's main street right beside the port, the “aurora season” for watching the northern lights — a growing tourism draw that brings a lot of shoulder-season business to the store — had just ended.

The company supports dozens of regional Indigenous and Inuit artists — carvers, painters and other artisans — working in stone, antler and seal skin, walrus ivory and musk oxen hair. The latter produces the softest wool, said Hooper, holding up a knitted scarf. “It feels like wearing smoke,” she said.



*Courtney Hooper, manager at Arctic Trading Co., holding a wolf pelt. "We don't want to be an oil town," she said. (Photo by Christopher Pollon)*

There's a back room full of sewing machines where skilled local artisans make moccasins or “flippers” — a tourist favorite. Another room is stacked with animal skins and fur from coyote, wolf, beaver, silver fox, skunk, and harp and ring seal.

“We don’t want to be an oil town,” Hooper said when asked about the future of the port. “Grain and minerals would be great, though.”

Cruise ships are also promising for the future, she said, because visitors flood into town for a short period of time, spend their money, and then sail away. As of June, there are two cruise ships booked to visit Churchill in the 2025 season.

“Oil brings a new perspective,” said the Winnipeg native who manages an [eco-tour company](#) with her husband when she is not running the store.

“We have so much wildlife here in the water. If we kill off the belugas, the polar bears, how would we survive if we rely so much on tourism?”

Cooper’s concerns go beyond the environment.

“Churchill as a town cannot support largely unexpected inflows of people,” she said. “Where will all these [new workers] be living? We already have a housing situation. What will it look like if we get bigger?”

Uncertainty about the future of the port is also putting many locals in a tough situation, she said.

“People feel like they’ve been promised again and again. So many people are waiting to see if they get hired at the port, and are not doing other things.”



*Seaport Hotel in Churchill, Man. Owner Mike Spence, who also serves as Churchill's mayor and a co-chair of the Arctic Gateway Group, said the town will need to find a balance between the port's future development and tourism.*

### **Back at the Seaport Hotel**

Churchill was proposed as an oil export hub as recently as 2013, when OmniTRAX held community meetings which were not warmly received.

It didn't help their case, recalled Stover, that [47 people at Lac-Megantic](#), Que. had just been killed by the derailment of rail cars carrying oil to market.

A life-long Churchillian, Stover straddles a line Churchill will have to cross if the port is to grow. He would consider a return to working at the port — "I'd never say never" — but is also settled in a job as a logistics coordinator for one of the town's biggest ecotourism companies.

It's nearing its last call at the Seaport Hotel when Michael Borden, a native of Caledon, Ont., comes into the bar to buy off-sale beer.

Now 29, he moved here a few years back to work at the airport, joined the Churchill volunteer fire department, and never left. There is no place on earth even remotely like Churchill, he said.



*A Beluga surfaces for air as whale watchers head out in kayaks on the Churchill River in Churchill, Man., July 4, 2018. THE CANADIAN PRESS/John Woods*

He described a transformative experience that made him want to stay: donning swim goggles, he stuck his head underwater near the confluence of the Churchill River and Hudson Bay, and made eye contact with a duo of belugas.

The whales did a double take and acknowledged his presence with genuine curiosity. Dozens of belugas at this moment were communicating through a cacophony of whistles and song as he looked on.

“You can’t put a price on that experience,” he said, walking out of the bar.

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