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Bearing Witness

Polar explorer on thin ice

The goal of Eric Larsen and Lonnie Dupre's first ever trip to the North Pole during summer was to call attention to the plight of the polar bear and to global warming. The morning they completed their almost 1,000 mile trek to the North Pole, the two woke in their tent to the unpleasant impression they were about to become "two all-beef patties in a polar bear's Big Mac."



Eric Larsen

Larsen and Dupre were scheduled keynote speakers at the Public Interest Environmental Law Conference (PIELC) at the UO last week-end; however, Dupre was not able to attend because a snowstorm disrupted his flight. The theme of this year's PIELC was "Cultivating Corridors for the People," but it was the topic of climate change that dominated this year's gathering.

The conference featured at least 10 panels specifically on global warming and climate change. The Arctic may be the most obvious place affected by global warming, but panelists pointed out the ways in which climate change also affects the food harvests of indigenous peoples, marine ecosystems and forest management. Panel themes ranged from "The Heat is On: Firefighters Confront Global Warming and Wildfires" to "Tribal Strategies to Combat Climate Change."

Al Gore and his Oscar-winning film *An Inconvenient Truth* may have brought the topic of global warming to the attention of the moviegoing public, but it is the polar bear that is the true spokesman for this topic. Polar bears are what environmentalists call "charismatic megafauna." They are animals that appeal to the public and become the subject of environmental campaigns, which then also save other less popular creatures (zooplankton for example) in the same ecosystem.

Last year the Center for Biological Diversity, along with Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defense Council, all of whom had representatives at this year's conference, successfully sued to get polar bears considered an endangered species. The final decision on their status will be made some-

time this year. Larsen reported that the melting sea ice he witnessed is causing polar bear numbers to drop, and he urged the audience to support the listing of the bear as an endangered species.

Rather than skiing to the North Pole, Larsen and Dupre found themselves paddling canoes much of the way. The ice was breaking up earlier than ever, forcing them to leap giant cracks and hike over broken and melting ice. The North Pole is in fact not on land but over frozen water, hundreds of miles from shore. As this ice melts, so does polar bear habitat. The loss of ice is so widespread that polar bears, normally excellent swimmers, are drowning before they can reach safety.

While most panelists addressed the issue with grave seriousness, Larsen was lighthearted in his approach. He interspersed his facts about the effects of warming upon the Arctic — the weather was so warm it was raining at the North Pole — with jokes at his own and his audience's expense. In person, Larsen was clean cut and charming. He looked more like one of the lawyers than a veteran dogsledder and Arctic adventurer. But his photos documenting his travels showed a different side. When he showed the crowd a photograph of himself halfway to the North Pole, he pointed out that his matted and dirty hair was standing on end from not showering for a month. Gazing out at his audience he observed, "I see a lot of you out there are wearing that style right now."

At the end of their journey, after an anticlimactic arrival at the North Pole (complete with a photo of the explorers looking tired and dazed), Larsen reported the ice they were traveling on was thin and constantly moving. It was only 3 feet thick, and it took them several days to find ice strong enough to support the helicopter that would take them to a Russian ice-breaker for their journey home.

Thin ice, rain at the poles — the polar bear is becoming the canary in a coal mine for the dangers of global warming. As Larsen put it, "No ice. No bears." **EW**

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