

# On New Year's Day, a cold splash of camaraderie

*Polar Bears greet the new year fearlessly, if wet*

By Andrew R. Tonry  
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Caraousing after New Year's kisses I tried to find someone to join me. But I didn't get so much as a nibble. No one wanted to think of the rapidly approaching morning, much less greet it by plunging into the ice-cold ocean.

Of all those I asked, none had ever jumped in alongside the Arch Cape Polar Bear Club. But a few had heard of it. Their guffaws came, dripping with no shortage of sarcasm.

"You're gonna get naked with a few old men, eh?"  
"What a way to kick off 2016."

I all but gave up. With a few friends I wandered out of the Warren House and down to the beach in hopes of seeing the northern lights, which were supposedly visible. Besides the stars, though, the only lights found were attached to crab boats.

After reigniting an abandoned bonfire then huddling around it for a temporary respite from whipping winds, we made our ways home. As we parted, I offered one last salvo.

"Polar Bear Club in the morning?"

No takers.

## Jaggedly crisp

The buzz of a blaring alarm clock is never a pleasant sound, particularly after partying. This goes exponential for Jan. 1.

At least the sun was out, illuminating my bedroom, the white sheets almost aglow. The air outside them was jaggedly crisp. Aching and reluctant, I arose. I splashed handfuls of hot water onto my face and jammed a toothbrush into my mouth. I grabbed two



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Baby, it's cold outside on New Year's Day in Cannon Beach.

towels then piled multiple layers over my Speedos — long johns, sweatpants, a T-shirt, two sweaters, a wool coat, beanie and wool socks. I wrapped the towels around my neck like a scarf, pulled on my boots and stepped outside.

It was beautiful. I squinted at the glowing, clear blue skies, bright green grass and rays of golden sun. It was also cold. Really frigid. The bunnies scattered as I sauntered to my car, my breath visible, even after closing the door. I turned the key and KMUN chimed over the stereo.

On the roads there were few signs of life besides a few pattering chimneys. As I pulled onto U.S. Highway 101 I noticed a pool of water in the middle of the highway. It was frozen over. A mile or two south I passed a lone cyclist. He too was starting his year with some healthy determination. I began to cackle. His devotion seemed to pale. I was fixing to jump in the ocean.

By the time the car had warmed it was time to get back out. I reached Arch Cape, but my directions were a little loose. A "second house on the right"

kind of thing. But I wasn't sure where, exactly, so I just tramped through some foliage, over the crooked boulders of the sea wall and down to the sand.

No real sign of any Polar Bears, though. I posted up, facing south, away from the wind. It really was gorgeous. As gorgeous as it was cold. I could see the crab boats so well I began to wonder: were they closer than normal, or was this day just that clear?

## His name was Rip

I saw a man with a big, black, wool navy coat with close-cropped gray hair and short. He strolled out, ankle deep into the water and plunked something down into it. He raised it up and looked. Taking a measurement, perhaps? He returned to a fledgling bonfire and I approached.

"Are you a Polar Bear?" I wondered.

"Mhmm."

His name was Rip. In his orbit were two boys about middle-school age. They were tending to the family fire, stirred back to life from last night's celebration.

Rip had indeed been taking the water temperature.

It was in the neighborhood of 40 degrees, which was likely warmer than the air. Such knowledge offered scant consolation.

When the wind blew hard its force was staggering. And while sustained gusts strong enough to create little trails of sailing sand are not uncommon, rarely did it get whipped to face level, where it now approached.

Rather suddenly, boys, girls, men and women, grandpas and grandmas of all ages began streaming over the rocks and onto the beach. They were in all manner of dress — covered in bathrobes, hoodies, wrapped in towels, and in nothing more than their skivvies. Old men in parkas to teenage girls in bikinis.

"They want to be in and out quickly as possible," Rip said of the hastily assembling ranks.

In a beanie, a fleece jacket, and with a towel wrapped around his waist I recognized Court Carrier from the Cannon Beach Chamber of Commerce. I asked him if he knew who here had been a Polar Bear the longest. He pointed me back towards Rip.



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Polar Bear "Rip" (right) and friend on New Year's Day.

The group had grown to maybe 75 or more. They began lining up down the sand, facing the water, hand-in-hand as they jumped and wiggled to stay warm. The line grew in each direction. I peeled off my layers and ran out to join them. Just as I did the hands broke and legs began pounding towards the surf.

## Mobile within ice

All were jolted as their toes breached the water. Some hesitated. Others barreled on. I was deterred to rip off the plunge like a Band-Aid, in one fell swoop. Ahead of me a gaggle of teenage boys dove into the shallow waves. No point in waiting, I figured. It was time. As the next swell approached I launched my-

self through it like a plate glass window. Submerged for those brief fractions of a second, I felt mobile within ice, somehow still liquid. I vaulted upright and blasted out of the water like a rocket — bellowing, twisting and shouting in a celebratory convulsion of life and physical shock.

Gone immediately were any remnants of the night before. The plodding drag of feeling half-asleep vanished. I was 110 percent, lean, mean, freezing machine. Indeed, that blink under water was more potent, more explosive than all the cups of coffee in all the world. I was not only awake, but very much alive.

So too did the plunge invigorate numerous biological red alerts — Dire systems warning. We cannot sustain this. Uncontrollably, my breath shortened and quickened. I shivered with the first pangs of hypothermia. Walking from the water, the wind reared up. It stopped me in my tracks. Jesus. My body, dripping wet, felt as if icicles were forming in real time on my chest, a slick, icy crust overtaking my skin. I tightened, but also in a good way — leaner, and in much greater physical harmony than only moments prior.

As I returned home to Cannon Beach, a newly minted Polar Bear, I roused my friends for brunch. Their heads were still cloudy, and they shivered as they left the house.

All day I stayed toasty warm.

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