

Cochrane Polar Bear Habitat

Volunteer Expeditions



Conservation - Research - Education

Why join the Habitat?

Volunteers are crucial to the success of our mission and we are committed to providing quality expeditions that benefit volunteers, our community, and the bears in our care.

The Habitat is the only care facility in the world solely dedicated to polar bears. Since 2004, we have been working with volunteers and academics to raise the standard of care for bears who can't survive in the wild.

We support our practical conservation work with research programmes and educational initiatives to build awareness. The help you provide and the data you collect whilst on your expedition are critical to better understand polar bear behaviour in the wild, and develop effective approaches for safeguarding this vulnerable species.

By joining us as an international volunteer you are contributing to the success of our mission: saving polar bears.



Supervised training

The Habitat's internationally-respected and experienced staff will help you to get the most from your expedition by making you a key member of our team from the first day.

While many volunteer and gap-year organisations host large numbers of volunteers, we believe that experiential learning is enhanced with extensive hands on experience, practice and personalized attention.

At the Habitat, we want you to discover both the exciting and challenging sides of conservation, and we are dedicated to providing the best training and support to optimise your experience. For this reason we choose to limit our enrollments ensuring an effective ratio of experts to volunteers. As a small integrated team, you will build tighter friendships that we hope, will last a lifetime.



Expedition living

Adapting to a small community can be challenging, especially when winter lasts six months. Working days can be demanding and will sometimes require long hours or physical work in tough conditions. While caring for polar bears is rewarding in itself, we seek to provide a work-life balance to help you experience all that our community has to offer.

We choose to support our community the same way they've supported us over the years, and give you the opportunity to get to know us through homestays. All accommodations will be within walking distance of the Habitat and will give you a chance to explore our town and get to know the warm people that make this their home.

We also recognize the wide variety of dietary choices people make, and that's why you get to decide what works best for you. A weekly food allowance is provided, giving you the freedom to share local meals with your hosts or cook for yourself.



Funding

We recognize that when navigating the sea of volunteering opportunities out there, one of the main considerations is to identify what the cost includes and understand where your money is going.

For some programmes you're expected to buy a lot of additional gear. With us you only need to dress appropriately for the season you spend here (and we'll be pleased to advise you on that). All research equipment and work supplies are provided on-site.

Typically, a third of your fee goes to your experience, and includes accommodations, food, field trips, and teaching. It is all spent within the community itself. The remaining two thirds goes directly to our operations, and helps us provide our polar bears with the best care possible.

As a registered not-for-profit charity, our accounts are publicly available for anyone to see how funds are spent.



Located in Northeastern Ontario, Cochrane is the last stop on your way to James Bay; your only way north from here is by train on the Polar Bear Express. The area was originally a summer campsite for Indigenous hunters, but grew into an active trading hub when the Hudson Bay Company arrived. With a stop along the trans-Canada railway, Cochrane grew from trading station to an incredibly diverse and enterprising town, drawing lumberjack and gold miners to the district. To this day Cochrane is a mosaic of old and new cultures. Here you will hear people switching between English, French and Cree.

With our Arts and Entertainment Pavilion right on Commando Lake, the Ininew Friendship Centre, free bike-share, book share, piano pop-ups on the sidewalk, and weekly Farmer's market, among others, our town revolves around sharing friendship and culture. You will feel welcomed at any of our many events throughout the year, whether at the 10-day winter carnival, Summerfest, or celebrating our bears' birthdays, there is always cause for celebration and you will always be encouraged to participate.



Cochrane:

A wonderfully unexpeted diversity.



The Habitat:

What started as an initiative to save orphaned polar bears, soon became a home for rescued and retired captive bears who wouldn't be able to survive in the wild. Over the last 15 years, we have given priority to the best quality care to each individual bear.

Everything here is designed to reproduce as closely as possible, the natural living conditions of polar bears in the wild.

Located not far from the natural range of the southernmost sub-population of polar bears, our seventy-acre property includes a ten-acre lake where the bears can cool off during summer and enjoy the ice during winter. We try to feed the bears their normal food as closely as possible, and each one of our bears receives a tailored diet depending on their unique needs throughout the year. We have also expanded to work with coastal and Indigenous communities on human/bear interactions.

With fifteen years of experience, the Habitat is looking forward to sharing its detailed dataset with various research teams to improve our understanding of wild polar bears, and support conservation efforts.

Life on Expedition

What to expect?

Expect data collection, behavioural monitoring, night security patrols, meal preparation, and making enrichments. Running the Habitat involves many other tasks as well. You'll be asked to contribute to ground-keeping, cleaning, guiding, and community outreach. There is a lot to keep you busy here! Our days can be long and sometimes physically challenging, but will present you with a multitude of learning opportunities. There is of course also time to enjoy the company of our furry residents and experience our community.

Staff & Training

We're a small and lean organisation, so you will get to know every member of our staff in person. The programme coordinator will be your direct contact throughout your stay. Once the coordinator gets you settled and up to speed with introductory classes, our conservation manager, bear keepers and site manager will supervise various aspects of your training. You will get more and more independent as your knowledge and skills grow, but will always have expert supervision.

Life outside of work

There is plenty to keep you busy in and around town. Whether it means kayaking on the lake, enjoying a live band at the pavilion, playing volleyball or resting at the beach (yes, we do have a beach in town), the summer is full of opportunities. Once snow and ice take over, it's all about winter wonders. Try snowmobiling or ice fishing, and if you're brave enough, why not take the polar bear plunge.

Safety at the Habitat

Looking after the largest land predators in the world involves a lot of responsibility. Safety is critical for us, whether yours or that of our bears. You will get extensive training with mandatory online courses, lectures and participation in safety drills. Our staff are first aid certified and our emergency protocols and procedures are revised regularly. Cochrane is also home to a well-equipped hospital, and hosts a variety of medical professionals.



Don't disappear!

There is nothing easier than to stay in touch with us and remain involved after your expedition. Make sure to share your experience on our blog and keep an eye on the bears via our live cams and social media accounts.

As an alumnus of our International Volunteer Programme, you will receive a lifetime membership with free admission to the Habitat, and receive our bi-annual newsletter, but remember to keep visiting our website if you're interested in future job opportunities.



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