

OUR ARCTIC – OUR LIFE

Ottawa, May 20 – Canada’s accredited zoos and aquariums are launching a national awareness campaign to engage Canadians in supporting the preservation of biodiversity in our Arctic. May 22nd is the International Day of Biodiversity and many zoos and aquariums are holding special events to mark the occasion.

“2010 is the International Year of Biodiversity” declared Rachel Leger, President of the Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums. “CAZA and its partners have identified our Arctic regions as a priority concern for addressing challenges to Arctic species and their habitats. We are reaching out to Canadians everywhere to enlist their support in ensuring a sustainable future for this vital part of our country. In connecting with Canadians from coast to coast to coast, we will be working closely with our partners – Parks Canada, the Canadian Wildlife Federation and Polar Bears International”.

Throughout International Biodiversity Year 2010 and into the future, CAZA member zoos and aquariums will present a broad range of information and education about environmental issues in Canada’s Arctic. The variety of life on earth – the plants and animals that make up ecosystems – is called biodiversity. Thousands of organisms - bacteria, insects, plants, birds and mammals - live and thrive above, on and under a single square foot of earth. All of these species are connected like the strands of silk in a spider’s web. If a species is lost or habitat disappears, the web starts to fall apart. When we lose this biodiversity we lose life itself.

“It’s easy to forget that people are an integral part of nature, that our lives are tied to the living things around us” said Rachel Leger. “Biodiversity provides us with the food, water, medicine and fuel we need to survive. And our actions can destroy or preserve it”.

At first glance its vast, icy surface might seem empty, but Canada’s Arctic is filled with extremely rich and active ecosystems. From tiny plankton to huge whales, entire communities of animals and plants make their homes on, under or at the edge of the ice. The unique polar species that live in the Arctic are specially adapted to its extreme conditions – freezing temperatures, strong winds, deep snow, thick ice and permafrost. Even slight changes to the Arctic’s fragile habitats can have a huge impact on these species, and human activities are taking their toll. Pollution, climate change and development all affect Arctic temperature, habitat and available food sources. As their Arctic home continues to change, polar bears, belugas, caribou and the smaller northern animals and plants that support them face an uncertain future.

Protecting species and habitats with national parks, working jointly with Inuit communities to manage these parks, conducting scientific research and spreading the message to Canadians across the country are all part of the cooperative approach inspired by the International Year of Biodiversity and being implemented by CAZA and its three

partners. Education programs, lectures, special events, community presentations and other activities will be carried out at each of the participating accredited zoos and aquariums across the country. CAZA members will also help out with Arctic field work and the research that supports it – and will invite Canadians to contribute to this worthwhile endeavour. This special effort is intended to build on the extensive work carried out by Canada's accredited zoos and aquariums in captive breeding and population management programs.

A wealth of information about the Arctic, its biodiversity challenges and what is being done to address them can be found on a new, specially-designed website at www.ourarctic.ca

The Canadian Wildlife Federation (CWF) is a charitable organization that works from coast to coast to maintain a bright future for Canada's wildlife by protecting species and spaces. CWF works with Canadians to make a difference to the kind of legacy we leave for wildlife and our children through programs that reflect its balanced approach to wildlife issues.

On behalf of the people of Canada, Parks Canada protects and presents nationally significant examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage, and fosters public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment in ways that ensure their ecological and commemorative integrity for present and future generations.

Polar Bears International (PBI) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the worldwide conservation of polar bears and their habitat through research, stewardship, and education. PBI provides scientific resources and information on polar bears and their habitat to institutions and the general public worldwide.

The Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums is a not for profit national organization that represents Canada's 25 accredited zoos and aquariums. It sets standards through its accreditation program, leads and coordinates work in the fields of research, conservation and education, and represents its members' interests with governments at all levels.

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