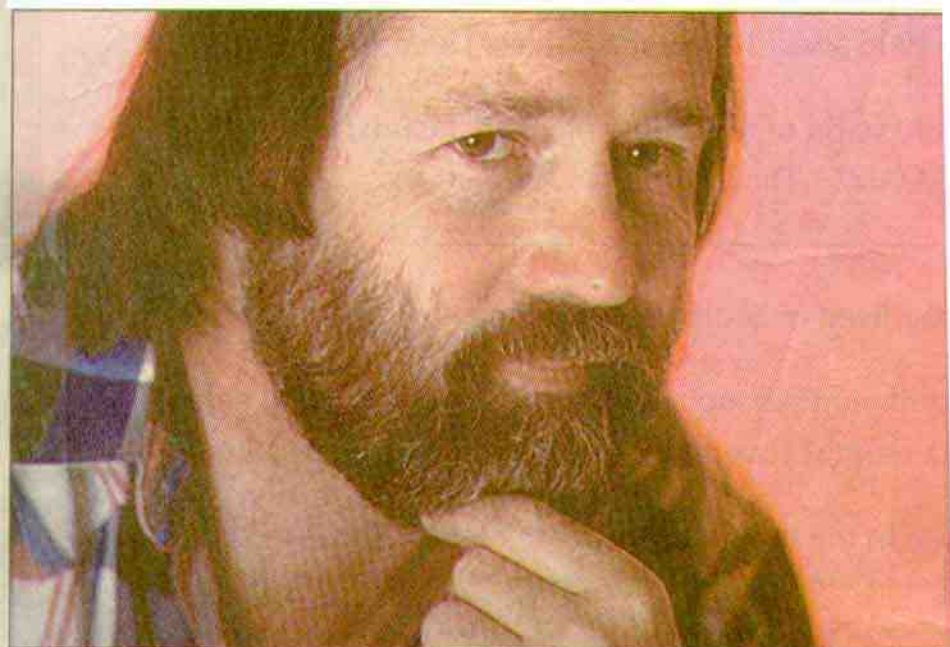


# Polar passion

Poz Churn  
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Jim Halfpenny leads a tour of bear watchers to Churchill each year as part of his business, A Naturalist's World.

## Gardiner filmmaker Jim Halfpenny has an affinity for big white bears

**J**im Halfpenny lives in the middle of prime grizzly bear habitat, but he's more at home with the great white bears of the Far North.

"I feel much more comfortable around polar bears than grizzly bears," says the Gardiner filmmaker whose movie — "Living Among Ice Bears" — reveals what happens to the bears when they encounter humans on the shores of Hudson's Bay.

If someone surprises a grizzly, it may knock them down and bite them a couple of times. "A polar bear, if you surprise it, will probably go the other way," Halfpenny said. However, he added, "Anybody's got to be cautious of a 1,500-pound Chihuahua."

Halfpenny's film is among 100 entries in Missoula's International Wildlife Film Festival competition. The winners will be shown April 8-9 at Missoula's Wilma Theater.

The bears congregate each winter at Churchill, Manitoba until the ice on

Hudson's Bay breaks up and they can head into the water after their favorite prey, seals.

People come by the thousands to watch the largest carnivores in North America. Although Canadian authorities try to make sure human-bear encounters are kept to a minimum, the great bears of the North still get in trouble.

Polar bears are as curious as cats, said Halfpenny, who leads a tour of bear watchers to Churchill each year as part of his business, A Naturalist's World. "A polar bear will follow anything that moves," he said.

In Halfpenny's film, wildlife officials shoot several bears with tranquilizers and take them to bear "jail," a big concrete garage with cells. They later get a ride out of town — slung beneath a helicopter.

"Ninety-five percent of the (polar) bears don't come back," Halfpenny said. "Most of the bears in Yellowstone (National Park that get relocated) come back. In Yellowstone, there's nowhere

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else to go."

The 15-minute movie also captures the sights and sounds of the animals at play. Halfpenny shows the polar bears playing touch-tag with Alaskan huskies. The bears and dogs seem to be having a good time romping around, taking swats at one another. A dog team owner interviewed in the film said some bears appear to have human-like traits, repeatedly choosing to roughhouse with certain dogs because they like them.

A biologist, teacher, tracker and writer with a doctorate from the University of Colorado, Halfpenny is familiar with the habits of black and grizzly bears, as well as polar bears. He's led tours to view and study blacks and grizzlies in Alaska, British Columbia and Yellowstone National Park.

Halfpenny, 47, also gives talks and slide shows on other wild animals and has taught classes each summer since 1980 at the Yellowstone Institute in Yellowstone Park. For the past several summers there, he and two other bear specialists have taught a class titled, "Bears: Bones, Signs and Stories."

He's also been a research fellow for the Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research at the University of Colorado, and a member of a Tanzanian dinosaur tracking expedition sponsored by National Geographic.

Charles Jonkel, founder of the International Wildlife Film Festival, has led tours to view polar bears in Churchill for the past 10 years. He calls Halfpenny's film an accurate portrayal of the bears' problems.

"The bears are hurting," Jonkel said. "They learn bad habits, a little here, a little there, and the next thing they know, they're in trouble. They get too familiar with people, liking human foods, and get in trouble for hanging around.

"The province hasn't put up much money to handle the situation," Jonkel continued. "They're handling it by trial and error. They don't look at what's been done in Alaska and learn from that."

Halfpenny hopes his film will inform the public about the plight of the polar bears. Because of public exposure, more solutions may be forthcoming to help the bears — and the people who flock to Churchill to see them.