

Wilson Heeds Call of the Wild

Staff

Dressed in a suit and chatting in her campus office, LeAnna Wilson, director, Community Services, has an appearance of

propriety that disguises her alter ego – that of the adventurer.

Within three months, Wilson visited the largest denning area in the world for polar bears in the Arctic and the frozen ice caps of Antarctica for penguins.

“I like to see animals in their habitat,” Wilson said.

In addition to polar bears, her trip to Churchill, Canada, on the Arctic waters of Hudson Bay, bagged Wilson a sighting of an Arctic fox, snow hare and snowy owl. She also photographed a mother polar bear nursing her cubs.

“There is only about four weeks in the year when people can see polar bears. The bears are in hibernation waiting for the tundra and waters of the Hudson Bay to freeze so they can cross solid surface to hunt seals,” Wilson said.

To reassure environmentalists, Wilson says that tours and the community are careful to protect the ecosystem. No one is allowed to walk on the tundra, and polar bears that do wander into Churchill are anesthetized and relocated to the Arctic environment.

“Polar bears are at the top of the food chain,” Wilson said. “Children in Churchill are taught to climb trees or gather at a public site for safety.”

Wilson describes Churchill as a town of 800 people and 1,200 polar bears. About 15,000 people visit the area, 1,040 miles north of Winnipeg, in the fall when the bears make their showing. Wilson was there Oct. 21-28, 2006.

On the other end of the world, Wilson explored the world of Antarctic penguins living in rookeries on glacier ice Dec. 20, 2006-Jan. 7, 2007. She also encountered seals, whales and albatrosses. Wilson flew into Punta Arenas, Chile, where she boarded a Norwegian boat for Antarctica. Small “Polar Circle” boats and gear were issued for excursions to glaciers and small harbors, where once again rules protect animals from tourists. Because temperatures were unusually mild (12 to 44 degrees) and winds light, Wilson and travel mates were able to take 11, rather than the usual five, excursions.



“Antarctica is like no other place in the world,” she said. “The crew stopped the boat in a place called downtown Antarctica, where one can turn 360 degrees and see nothing but icebergs – some as tall as skyscrapers.”

Wilson’s return trip took her through Drake Passage, where she endured a 35-hour raging storm, then on to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where she departed for the United States.

“This was not a trip for sissies,” Wilson said. “It was a real expedition.”

With this trip, Wilson crossed two more continents off her list to visit – Antarctica and South America.

“I had no desire to leave the United States until 1995 when a friend asked me to go to London,” Wilson said. “I haven’t stopped traveling since.”

The only continent left for her to visit is Australia.

Wilson said, “Visiting another culture, trying different food and seeing different terrains give you insight and expands your personal viewpoint” – an *apropos* statement for a director in JCCC’s branch devoted to continuing education.

LeAnna Wilson smiles as Gentoo penguins scurry on rocks in Antarctica.

