

Big picture

Polar power, by Joe Bunni

Photographer Joe Bunni *really* was an arm's length from this young polar bear, searching for food in Repulse Bay, in Nunavut, northern Canada. After three days on a small boat, he and his crew spotted her and followed from a distance. They cut the engine and bobbed on the surface until she relaxed and swam closer, curious. Bunni slipped into the water wearing a dry suit, snorkel and mask, roped to the boat, and started shooting. Suddenly, the bear approached him. He took this remarkable split-level shot - a winner at the Natural History Museum's wildlife photographer of the year exhibition - and, seconds later, her nose brushed his camera and she swam away.

Was he frightened? "No. I was trying to shoot in a quiet way, but a bear won't attack unless it can eat you right there. We were 500m from land, so to kill me would have wasted too much energy," he says, with the confidence of a man who spends 10 weeks a year diving with his camera. The rest of the time he's a dentist in Paris.

Polar bears, preferably perched on a melting iceberg, have become symbolic of global warming. Indeed, Bunni was searching for them in this corner of Canada to complete a project on endangered species. But despite appearances, he says this bear wasn't struggling. "She was interested in us. We saw four that week, and she was the friendliest."

Animals and landscapes, usually taken from the water, are Bunni's speciality. "I've got no patience for people, coming and going, making a fuss, asking questions." Spoken like a true dentist.

Hannah Booth

The Veolia Environment wildlife photographer of the year exhibition is at The Natural History Museum until 11 March 2012.

