

A Feast on Thin Ice

*Text : Marie Dielemans
Myriam Dielemans*

Illustrations : Muriel Dielemans

*Translation : Marie-Claire Humblet,
M.Ed. in Boston*

*Emmanuelle Humblet,
Environmental Planner,
VHB (New York office)*

D/2011/M.Dielemans/Editor



Dear Colleagues,

Dear Parents,

In the words of Khalil Gibran “In friendship all our thoughts, all our wishes, all our expectations are born wordless and are often shared with a mute joy” ... If so, talking to bears seems possible...

This fictional story will expose children to a major impact linked to climate change: starvation. It dangerously threatens the polar bears as soon as the sea ice melts, and also humans in some parts of the world because agriculture is very sensitive to climate change.

The children will also be made aware of the need for solidarity in helping those who suffer from these impacts.

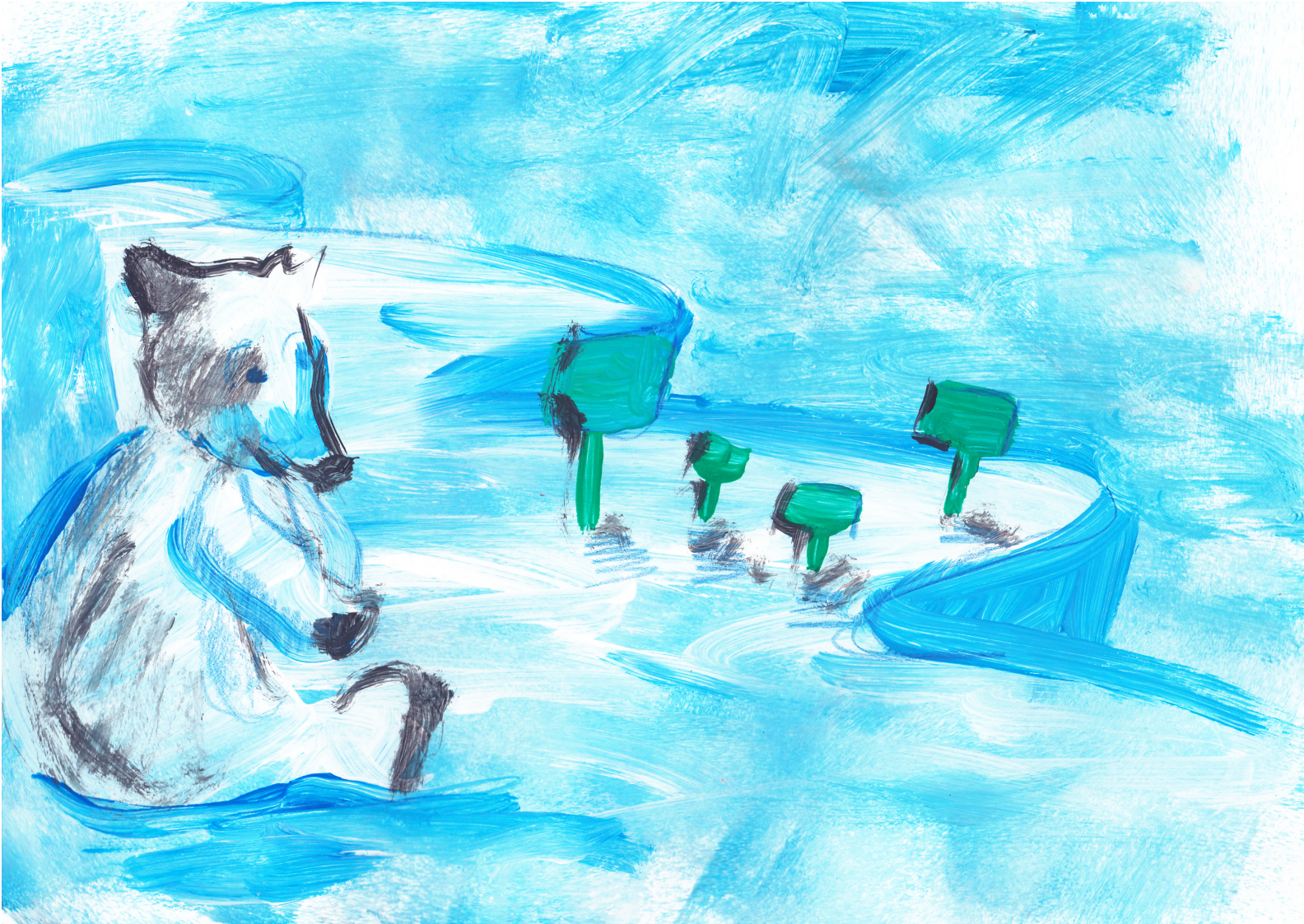
At the end of the story, as always in our series, they will be led to discover simple actions that save energy. This will empower them to become personally involved in the fight against global warming.

All bets are off in the kingdom of the polar bears ...

Alone in the middle of his huge ice territory, swaying with the motion of the tides and the winds, Nanouk, the young homeless king, is worried.

Today, for the first time, a protest has been organized on the sea ice and he does not like it! He almost hoped that a horrible blizzard would develop preventing his insurgent subjects to find him....

- *Contest and protest are not solutions ! ...*
'Thinking': that is the solution ! he mused.



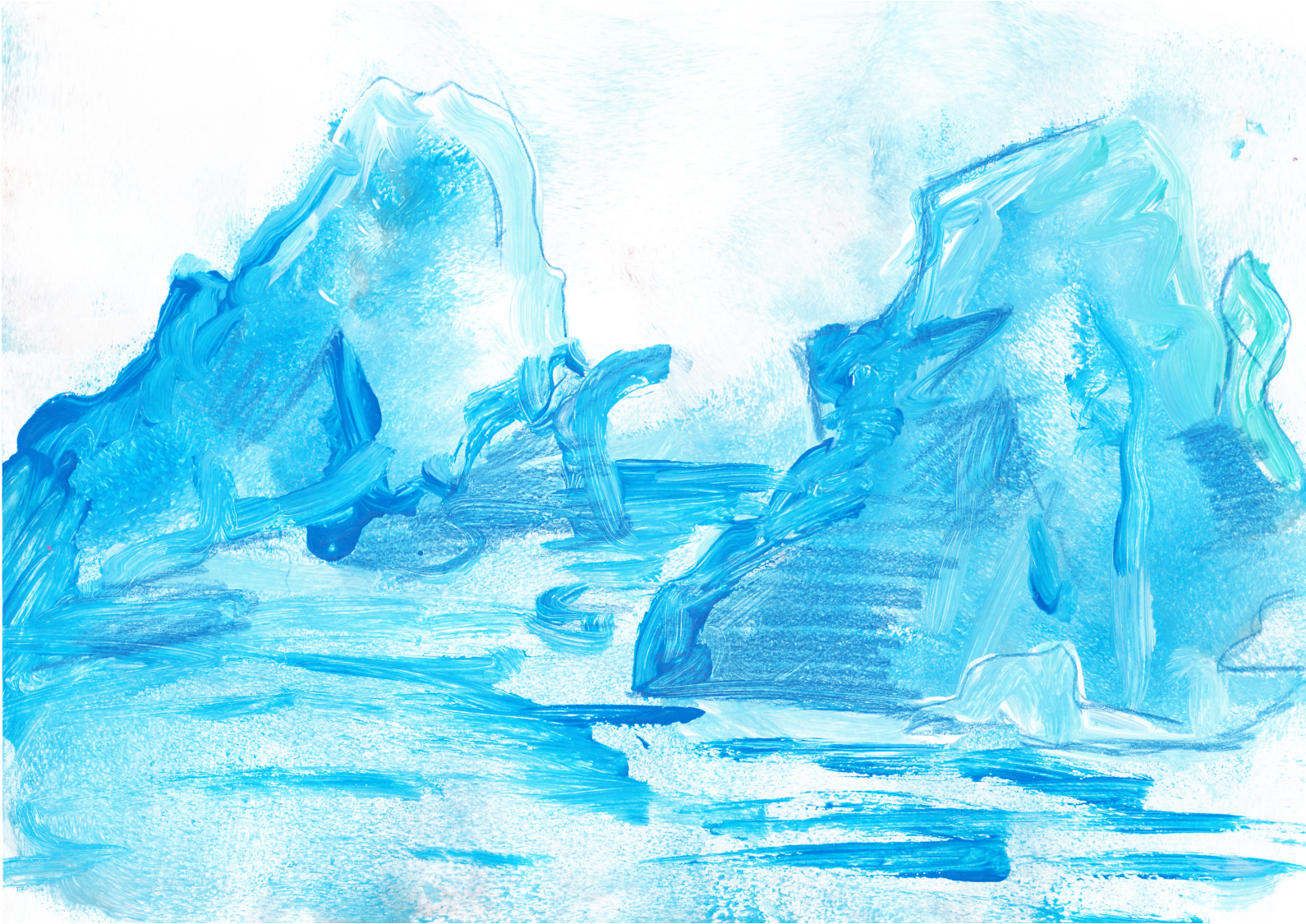
Making sure he did not meet anyone, he then left in the direction of an area where the sea ice had been damaged by the storm and where huge blocs of ice had rafted over one another ... and he settled down on top of one of them in order to think.

In the distance, voices rumbled:

- *It melts ! it melts ! We will die !*

Scanning the horizon, Nanouk then noticed that his beautiful kingdom was indeed already breaking up, announcing a long summer without ice ... much too long to survive without eating seal !

- *They are right we are all going to die ! he thought dejectedly.*



But suddenly, he raised his head with pride.

- *“I have a solution ! I have a solution !” he shouted so loudly that, in the distance, the protest stopped right then and there. Within moments he was surrounded by all the males of his Kingdom.*

With authority, he declared:

- *We are the best hunters on the sea ice and also good swimmers. We are going to become the best underwater hunters ! From now on we will catch the seals in the water and no longer on the ice ! This way, we will never go hungry again !*
- *Long live the king ! Long live the submarine bears ! clamored all the males superbly self-confident diving one by one in the inlet separating the blocs of ice.*
- *Mmm ! a delicious feast on the sea ice with our favorite meal ! thought Nanouk to himself diving in turn while already smacking his lips.*



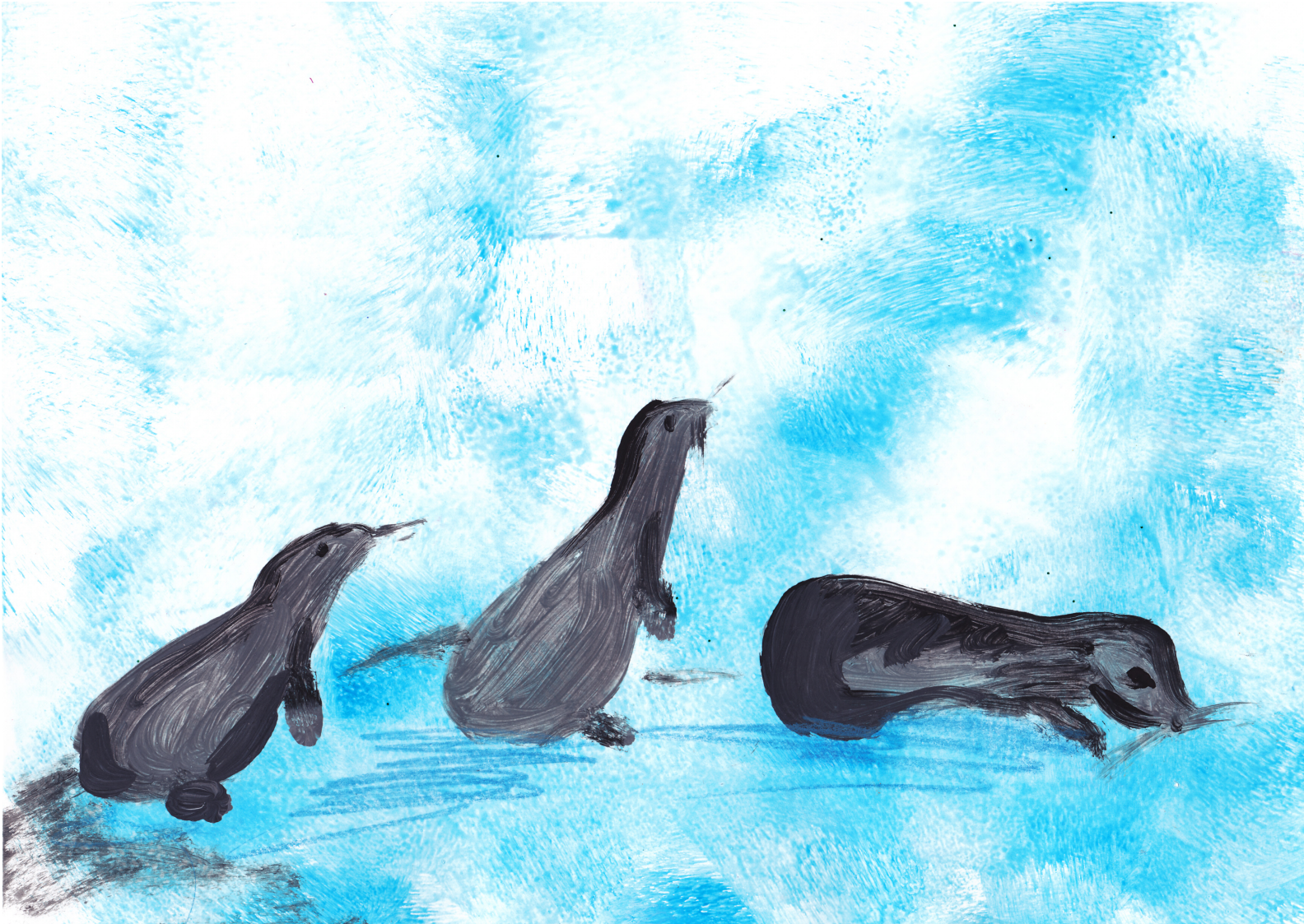
The seals had great fun. With their rocket-shaped body they were much faster in the water than those white-haired clumsy bears; and they could not get caught.

Finally, empty handed, the bears gave up one after another. Nanouk, totally spent, fell asleep on the icy water while floating gently.

- *'Ha ! Ha ! Ha ! You will never catch us ! No more feast on the sea ice !' seemed to be the message of thousands of little heads bobbing out of the water to breathe and seemingly around for the sole purpose of taunting him ...*

Nanouk woke up with a start ...

- *'It is just a nightmare, I have to think !' he mumbled, trying to reassure himself as he made his way back to the ice.*



Later, in a very bad mood, the king howled again so loudly that all the males of the kingdom immediately rushed around him.

- *'Since we are so bad at fishing underwater we will become the best thieves on earth !' he announced with authority. Let us steal food from the humans and we will no longer go hungry !*
- *Long live the king ! Long live the thieves ! shouted the males, having already forgotten their prior defeat.*
- *'We will have our feast on ice !' thought Nanouk rushing towards the human inhabitations.*



Suddenly, a strange noise cracked through the sky. Nanouk looked up and saw his friend Kounak in a net hanging from a red helicopter hovering over him.

Then came Niouk's turn, and Kanak's, and many others who flew over him.

- 'Steal food, do not steal away in the air !' screamed Nanouk.

But his words were drowned in the din of a flurry of helicopters, each carrying a flying bear.

Bewildered, Nanouk dashed furiously towards the land of the humans to prevent his last subjects from pretending to be birds !



But like all the bears that came too close to the land of the humans, Nanouk was similarly welcomed by skilled hunters who quickly put him to sleep deeply with their syringe guns. They tied him up, hung him to a helicopter, and flew him far away back on the sea ice.

In his artificial sleep Nanouk seemed to see thousands of arctic terns whirling around his head and taunting him while laughing:

- Ha ! Ha ! Ha ! You are way too heavy to fly and go with us to the land of the penguins !

Nanouk woke up again with a start, but this time, depressed and ashamed, he wandered around with his head hanging low, without thinking.



At that point, a small voice was heard out of nowhere :

- *To draw in humans you have to be crafty !*
- *“Who is it?” asked Nanouk, frightened because he could not see anyone.*
- *“It is I, the arctic fox” answered the voice. “You do not know me but I am the one who patiently waits for you to go away in order to eat the leftovers from your meals in the winter time. So I am your friend.”*
- *“Show yourself!” ordered Nanouk.*
- *“I am too afraid of your long teeth !” answered the fox, shyly.*

For the first time, Nanouk really needed a friend, so being an excellent hunter, he caught a seal that was taking it easy on the ice, and invited the stranger to share in his feast ...

While he was very much enjoying the meal, the fox used all of his tricks to have Nanouk confide in him the terror of his people.



- To steal is my job ! the fox responded accepting the last piece of seal. Let's go to the land of the humans ! During the summer I will steal their food for you and for your people, and during the winter you will hunt for me and my people on the sea ice.

Nanouk and the fox rubbed their snouts against each other to seal their deal and then started on their way. Where the ice was melted, Nanouk swam with the fox on his back.

Alluaq, the arctic explorer, seeing them go by thought he was under the spell of a polar hallucination ! He drank a glassful of alcohol, munched on an enormous piece of chocolate and repeated the measurements he was performing for the scientists several times to be on the safe side.



At first the stealing fox managed very well and Nanouk seemed happy.

But one day, he spotted his new friend, lifeless on the shoulders of a hunter probably craftier than he was.

Quite sad, Nanouk returned to his kingdom.

On the way, he became very upset: the ice was cracking under his weight and his subjects were leaving the kingdom for their summer vacation on terra firma !

- It is much too early ! he furiously growled.

But, powerless, he followed in their footsteps, distributing his meager loot to the mother bears he met.



Just as he arrived on land, Nanouk witnessed a baffling meeting. Alone and unarmed, a foolhardy young girl observed the kingdom he so loved.

Instinctively, Nanouk should have lept and eaten her up, for human flesh is delicious and sweet, ... but he could not, he felt like he was paralyzed, incapable of moving. He even thought he could hear what she was thinking.

- I must have eaten poisonous berries ! I have to be careful ! he thought while leaving.

But the next day, intrigued, Nanouk returned to the same spot at the same time. The young girl was there ... and he understood her thoughts once again.

Strange...



Nanouk had learned to become invisible on the sea ice by sliding forward on his stomach and carefully hiding his black snout between his paws ...

He used this technique to get closer to the young girl, but because he was not on the white sea ice, but on the snowless land instead, his efforts were all for naught.

Furthermore, the young girl got so scared at the thought of getting devoured that she lost consciousness when she saw him.

Next, he sat clumsily next to her, blowing from time to time a bit of warmth down her neck.



Her awakening was so magical and so sweet that the young girl forgot the ferociousness of this wild animal. She stroked his snout as she would have to a stuffed animal.

Reminded of his friend the fox, Nanouk thought that among the humans this gesture was also a sign of “friendship.” Happy, he opened wide his mouth and showing his big teeth said:

- Hello, I am Nanouk, the king of the sea ice.

Flabbergasted, the young girl mumbled:

- Dou, Dou ... Doumidia.

From then on, all summer long, as often as she could, Doumidia straddled Nanouk who took her along on the huge expanse of the tundra.



Then one day, the tundra turned red and Doumidia saw that Nanouk was fast losing weight.

Sadly he announced:

- *I am hungry. My fat has totally melted. The berries and the salmon are not enough for us polar bears. My people and I have to return to the ice to eat seals, or else we will die. Our vacation is over.*

A tear slid down Doumidia's cheek, but she rubbed his snout to show her friendship.

The king, deeply moved, howled so loudly that quickly he was surrounded by five males also skinny and famished. Doumidia was afraid.

- *A feast, finally ! growled one of the bears.*
- *Her thighs look appetizing ! muttered another one.*
- *Quiet ! Nanouk shouted.*

Then with majesty he continued:

- *I, Nanouk, king of the sea ice, in the name of the powers given to me I declare this young girl "Princess Doumidia of the Tundra" friend of all the bears of the kingdom.*
- *Long live the king ! Long live the princess ! the emaciated males cheered a bit disappointed to have missed a feast once more !*

Then, one by one they hit the road to return to their country ...



While Doumidia was feeling very lonely after the departure of her friend, a Mocking Snow Bunting brushed against her head chirping :

The sea ice has melted so much this summer that it is now the size of confetti ! Ha ! Ha ! Ha ! Nanouk became the king of confetti ! He will never find his kingdom again ! He is too skinny to swim that far !

Stunned, the new princess jumped into her kayak and paddled as hard as she could due North.

The bird was right, she spotted her friends bobbing on their backs exhausted after swimming so much.

- Your kingdom has melted ! Grab my kayak ! she yelled throwing a long rope to them.

But the bears, though skinny, were extremely hard to pull and Doumidia had a hard time paddling. A Right Whale took pity on this bizarre procession and returned the little group back to the coast by lifting the kayak on its back.

Alluaq the explorer who was scanning the sea with his binoculars believed once more that he was hallucinating ...



The following weeks were disastrous. The summer was endless. The frost that would have allowed the kingdom of Nanouk to rebuild was not coming and the bears without seals, a staple that was absolutely necessary, were starting to die of starvation.

Hoping to comfort Nanouk with a good piece of news, Doumidia consulted the scientists who studied the climate close to her home.

- *You lie ! It is impossible ! It is wrong ! she screamed at them when she found out that thousands of humans were also dying of starvation in the world because the climate was too warm.*

She was so dumbfounded that she fled running.

Alluaq, intrigued, followed her ...



Suddenly, Alluaq saw a skinny ravenous bear go up to Doumidia. He went ballistic because he had forgotten his gun but he nimbly ran toward the young girl and pulled her abruptly toward a shelter behind a rock.

Doumidia struggled, even hitting this stanger, and rushed, scared, into Nanouk's paws.

- *Princess, Nanouk told her then, this man only wanted to save you from my big teeth ! Let's apologize !*

Convinced he was the subject of grave polar hallucinations, Alluaq did not move; he let them come closer and even participated in their conversation.

Unbelievable ! He also had the gift of talking to bears !



Alluaq understood quickly that he was not dreaming and that a serious problem of starvation was killing the bears. As a competent scientist, he explained to Nanouk:

- *The sea ice, which is your kingdom, is dependent on the climate. However, the climate is warming because of greenhouse gases that humans emit into the atmosphere in too large quantities.*
- *But then, are we the ones who are killing the polar bears? Whispered Doumidia.*
- *Yes, Alluaq answered softly quite ashamed in front of Nanouk, but it is changing. Today, humans know that they have to save energy and use as little fossil fuel as possible (oil, coal, gas), and instead use wind and solar energy. Everyone is trying harder, but they do not know yet that you bears are dying and that this is an emergency.*

A bit reassured, Nanouk asked:

- *And the humans who die from starvation, is it also because of climate change ?*
- *Agriculture, which feeds many humans and many animals, is very sensitive to climate change, replied Alluaq. Scientists are studying this phenomenon. Meanwhile, solidarity is developing and people are trying to send food and rescue aid to those in need.*
- *Solidarity also exists in the Arctic region ! said a deep voice coming from the depth of the sea. We, the whales, we can get you back home. There are still a few sea ice patches up there close to the North pole !*

Nanouk was so happy that he screamed at the top of his lungs. In so doing, he gathered his emaciated subjects for a fantastic trip on the back of whales.



You will be most welcome in my kingdom when the freezing temperature will have rebuilt it, said Nanouk to Alluaq as he bid him farewell. Bring neither gun nor food. My subjects and I will hunt for you. This way you will be able to bring more scientific equipment to study the ice and the climate.

He then turned to Doumidia and said:

- Princess, I promise you that we will celebrate together the day when my kingdom is once more reunited with your land. In your honor, I will then organize a feast on the sea ice.*

Doumidia tried not to cry and rubbed his snout instead of answering.

A whale spouted to signal it was time to depart ... and a long convoy of emaciated, but saved, polar bears got on their way.



That evening, in order to lessen Doumidia's sadness, Alluaq brought her a small stuffed polar bear

...

Allowing herself to cry then, she rubbed its snout, resolving to wear a heavy sweater instead of increasing the thermostat, to never again forget to turn off the light when she leaves a room, to cover her pots when she cooks, to only use the car when there is no other way, to no longer leave the appliances in sleeping mode, and even to regularly empty her email inbox in order to avoid having to use a lot of energy to save too many messages ... for the sake of Nanouk, of course, but also for all her human brothers and sisters who suffer much from climate change.

Friendship is to understand one another without words, so Alluaq took Doumidia's hand tenderly and wished very much that this "feast on sea ice" might happen one day ...

But this does not just depend on him ... Think about it when you see a stuffed polar bear ... and most of all, do not forget to rub its snout !



Background information and Follow-up Activities

What do scientists say?

- Usually, close to the poles, where it is very cold, the sea freezes and becomes so thick that one can walk on it or be pulled by a dogsleight on it ... We can also drive a snowmobile on that ice. In some areas a plane can land on it. That frozen sea is called “sea ice”.
- Many animals live on the sea ice: one can spot walrus (but only at the North Pole), seals, polar bears (solely at the North Pole) who indeed like to eat the seals, but can only catch them on the sea ice because in the water seals are much better swimmers than bears and remain out of their reach. There are also penguins on the sea ice (only at the South Pole though) and several kinds of whales or large sea animals.
- Do you know how the sea morphs into sea ice?

First, when the water temperature drops to a bit under 0C or 32F, the sea shapes small pieces of ice that look like pancakes and that are called “pancake ice”.

When the temperature drops further the pancakes stick to each other to create a large white sheet of ice that gets thicker bit by bit.

But the sea constantly moves. It breaks the sheet of ice into pieces which then coalesce and then break again etc ... Sometimes ice fields collide and raft over one another. The sea ice moves with the sea, it is ever changing.

- But the climate is warming up. The sea freezes less and less easily and the sea ice shrinks. The life of the animals is disturbed, leading among other things to starvation for the polar bears.
- And yet, there is a solution to fight this climate warming ... we have to save energy.

Write on the blackboard: “Let us save energy”.

- Do you know actions we could take to easily save energy?
- We should let the children speak but we need to correct them so they understand the difference between pollution and climate warming.

e.g.: to not throw paper on the ground, is good for the environment but does not help the climate warming (although if the paper is being recycled, it will save some paper).

Find 10 easy actions see <http://www.contespedagogiques.be> (Click on Actions)

- Hang a poster that is all blue (it could be made with a blue paper tablecloth) and say: “Here is a sea without sea ice.”
- If everyone works hard to save energy, the sea will again be able to freeze and morph into sea ice.
- Encourage each child to choose the action among the list of 10 identified earlier that he/she is confident he/she can accomplish to save energy.
- Give to each child an ice pancake cut in white paper. To show that he/she truly commits to perform this action, he has to sign his/her name on the pancake, as if it was a contract with the Earth (you may choose to use only one color marker or a pencil to keep the board homogeneously colored). Each child will then put the pancake on the poster in the middle of the sea.
- Look how the sea ice develops as everyone tries to save energy ... When the poster is finished, add the polar animals.
- If we all keep our promises we will help the sea ice to develop again ! ...



“We are all alone, accountable to all.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

*For their efficient and precious expertise,
but most of all for their support,*

From the bottom of our heart

THANK YOU

- to ***Gauthier Chapelle***, PhD in Biology, Secretary General of the non-profit Biomimicry Europa;
- to ***Alain Hubert***, explorer and President of the International Polar Foundation
- to ***Emmanuelle Humblet***, Environmental Planner, VHB (New York office)
- to ***Marie-Claire Humblet*** M.Ed. in Boston,
- to ***Thierry Touchais***, Executive Director of the International Polar Foundation
- to ***Nathalie Vanisacker***, Engineer in Agronomy, Scientific Officer at the International Polar Foundation.