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News

Irreplaceable Wildlife In Seattle

By Emily Knudson



Last night I visited the Burke Museum at the University of Washington for the second time to see the same exhibit- The Last Polar Bear: Facing the Truth of a Warming World. It's definitely worth seeing at least once, especially on Free Thursdays (no admission fees on the first Thursday of the month). But I was in for an unexpected treat.

Irreplaceable: Wildlife in a Warming World is another photography exhibit on display at

Burke, which opened July 11. I'm glad I caught it when I did because it will only be on display through Sunday, August 10.

After emerging from the Arctic section of the museum (which I'll say more about another time), I found myself drawn to an image from the Antarctic: two Emperor penguins bowing their head, doting over their small furry chick. This lure, visible from the lobby, does its job well. How could I resist cute little fuzzy penguins? I went in for more; and there I found stunning photos of mountain goats, an army of tuna, a herd of narwhals, frilly orchids and much more.

A quote from Thomas Jefferson is placed amongst the photos of plants and animals threatened by climate change, which explains the theme of the exhibit quite well: "For if one link in nature's chain might be lost, another and another might be lost, till this whole system of things should be vanish by piece-meal." It is difficult to predict the full impact of global warming on the environment. Ecosystems can be complex and interconnected in ways we may not realize. So it's unlikely that we will be able to discern every impact one species may have on another or if a few degrees will or will not determine the fate of an ecosystem before the whole thing has collapsed.

However, this exhibit informs the museum patrons of some of the effects we can see. Most likely, what we do know is probably only a fraction of what is to come. But what about we don't know? I am reminded of a quote from 2002 that addressed a different topic, but I believe it may be more appropriate for this situation: "Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we

know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know." Although comical at the time, Donald Rumsfeld was trying to warn us of an unknown danger that could exist, which is impossible to prepare for or protect against. Put another way: what we don't know can hurt us. The most we can do to prevent the unknown worst case scenario is to do everything in our power to restore the environment to its natural (that is to say, pre-industrial) state the best we can, because the alternative may leave us in absolute ruins.

So while we know that pikas— a mousey looking member of the rabbit family, which can be spotted in the Cascade Mountains—can't survive in temperatures above 75 degrees for more than an hour and that their cool mountainous habitat is limited as temperatures rise; we don't necessarily know about the effects on, say, Rufous hummingbirds, or coyotes, or carpenter ants, or green algae, or emus, or...I think you can see where this is going. If we are unaware of just one glitch in the system, that may be all it takes for many ecosystems to topple.

While I've only discussed the purpose behind the art thus far, I do not mean to take away from the aesthetics of the photography itself. It is truly marvelous. The character and beauty of these animals, which shines through in these photographs, allow the on-lookers to easily relate to and sympathize with these valuable creatures. The vibrant hues of the sea turtles' shells in the teal, tropic waters look too good to be true. And their narrowed eyes seem judging yet wise. Then there's the more abstract photo of a migrating flock of Monarch butterflies rushing across a blurry patch of green.

So, if you find yourself in the U-District this weekend, I highly suggest you make the trip to the Burke Museum to see some inspiring artwork and to support a cause that affects every one of us because, like it or not, we are part of this network of flora and fauna and our existence is linked to theirs.

If you can't make it, you can visit their website to view some of the photos. If you're out of state, keep an eye on their calendar (at www.irreplaceablewild.org) to see if the exhibit will make a stop nearby.