



Kristin Laidre

Assistant Professor, School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences
Oceanographer, Applied Physics Laboratory, Polar Science Center

Zippering over Greenland in a helicopter tagging polar bears was not really something that Kristin Laidre saw in her future. The former ballerina moved from New York to Seattle to dance with the Pacific Northwest Ballet, later swapping the dancing studio for a laboratory by enrolling at the UW where she ultimately earned her PhD. Now an assistant professor in the School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences at UW's College of the Environment, Laidre studies some of the Arctic's most charismatic megafauna—narwhals, otherwise known as Arctic whales, and yes, polar bears—to learn about how a changing climate is playing out for top predators in high latitudes.

“The Arctic can tell us a lot about climate change and its effect on the Earth—the region is essentially the canary in the coal mine for what’s going on globally,” remarks Laidre. Her work focuses on the relationship between animals and their ice-covered environment, how that environment is changing, and how animals adapt. Laidre studies the animals directly and also uses them to help collect information about the physical environment. In recent work, she outfitted narwhals to take water temperature samples and bowhead whales to measure primary productivity as they dove in icy waters to forage for food.

Yet Laidre’s world isn’t all high tech. Tapping into her creative roots, she is utilizing artistic pathways to better connect science to people in the community. “There are lots of corollaries between art and science that can be merged—‘observation’ inherently links the two,” says Laidre, speaking of a collaboration between herself and professional expeditionary artist Maria Coryell-Martin. The two travel to high latitudes, capturing the dramatic landscapes and seascapes of Laidre’s studies through paintings and field sketches. They share their work with museums, galleries, and classrooms, using art as a hook for people of all ages to gain interest in science.

Laidre pushes the envelope to better understand these changing landscapes and their relationship to those dependent upon them. In large part, she is also driven by the people that live in these high latitudes, acknowledging an admiration and respect for “how local people are connected to their environment and to an amazingly specialized way of life.” She’ll be off again soon to spend her summer research season near the ice, hoping to better understand how to better protect the people and marine mammals connected to it.

Photos: Courtesy of Kristin Laidre

