


# Research among the polar bears

Just one Wageningen student was allowed to join a research expedition to Spitsbergen. She kept a diary of her adventures.

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**P**olar bears and whales, glaciers and ice floes. All the n beauty of a BBC documentary, and Master's student of biology Hilde de Laat has been seeing it all with her own eyes on the northern archipelago of Spitsbergen. She was one of the 50 lucky scientists, students, journalists and tourists who got to go along to the island of Edgeøya on the expedition ship the Ortelius. The researchers went ashore to collect reindeer bones or to observe animals and plants. Hilde's own task was to observe the researchers. Throughout the expedition she has been keeping Resource (-online.nl) informed about her adventures. 



Hilde de Laat



PHOTO: OCEANWIDE EXPEDITIONS

## Day 1

It is one o'clock in the morning but it is still incredibly light. Every now and then the sun even peaks out between the clouds. I am at the northernmost campsite in the world and the view is breathtaking. What an opportunity I've been given to join this expedition! The adventure I've been dreaming about for three years is about to start. I can already picture my work on board: observing researchers, journalists, tourists and the leaders of the expeditions. My research will focus on the interactions between these groups.

In the next morning I get on my rented bike to head to the little settlement. The expedition members in their blue jackets are swarming over the village, everyone is cheerful and curious what tomorrow will bring. The exchange of research methods is in full swing already. 'What kind of research are you going to do?' is the question you hear everywhere in the village. I join in a little hesitantly; as one of the few Master's students I do feel a bit inexperienced among these zealous scientists.

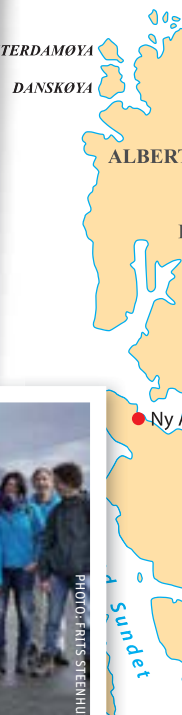


PHOTO: FRITS STEENHUISEN

## Day 2

Today we boarded the ship the Ortelius. Quite an undertaking because the ship is not docked at the quay so all the baggage, all the food and all the passengers had to be transferred to the ship in small boats, the Zodiacs. It took us the first couple of hours to sail out of the sheltered bay. Our first trip ashore was on today's programme but unfortunately a polar bear messed that up. We sailed on to another place and met a few whales on the way. What amazing creatures! It is only day one and we have already seen northern minke whales, humpback whales and fin whales.

At four o'clock in the morning I got into the Zodiac for my first trip ashore! The researchers set to work straightaway. The biologists flew around collecting mosses, mites, seawater and sand. The tourists stared wide-eyed at how the biologists go crazy about a mite. The NOS team loved it too. The journalists were over the moon about that shot of a bucket and a butterfly net.







## Day 3

Today I helped Andrea Sneekes of IMARES. She is interested in zooplankton, and in particular the impact of ballast water treatment on the ecosystem. Big ships pump water from the sea into their hulls to optimize balance: this ships pump the water out, however, and intrude a big impact on the ecosystem. Andrea wants to find out how the ecosystem can cope with

Besides the research there is also time to enjoy ourselves of course! In between the collecting we take in the beautiful landscape. The first ice floes are drifting on the sea. What an amazing sight. I suddenly feel so small in that bizarre, vast landscape with its steep mountain slopes and little glaciers. The landscape is still extremely quiet. We can hear ice floes cracking kilometres away!



Day 4

Today I was assigned to the tourist group. We went for a lovely walk in a stunning area, between glaciers and rivers, through valleys and over peaks. The temperature was a lot cooler than yesterday. The actual temperature was around 2 degrees Celsius but it felt a lot colder because of the bitter wind. So I was happy when we could return to the warm ship. We felt sorry for the team at Kapp Lee, who had been dropped off there at eight o'clock in the morning to build a weather station.

When we headed back towards Kapp Lee to pick them up, we were shocked to find that the pack ice had drifted. The team on shore had noticed this too and they were worried that they might have to spend the night on the island. Luckily there was a little hut on the beach and they had managed to light a small fire. Eventually the zodiacs were able to navigate between the ice floes and the researchers were picked up at 21.30 hours. Phew, what a relief. They came aboard shivering and were quickly served a well-earned hot meal.



## SPITSBERGEN IN 1977

The 12 Wageningen UR researchers who went along use the limited time they have for useful pilot projects. On the impact of oil pollution in the polar region, for instance. Associate professor of Resource Ecology Sip van Wieren joined an expedition to Spitsbergen back in 1977. On [resource-online.nl](http://resource-online.nl) you can watch a film about that trip.

