TIMESONLINE

From The Sunday Times

February 17, 2008

How climate change sparked a Canadian gold rush

It's little more than an ice-bound collection of shacks besieged by hungry polar bears. But climate change has sparked a gold rush in Churchill, population 923. Within 10 years, this tiny Canadian port could be transformed into a hub of world trade

Pope Brock

"Catch a wave and you're sittin' on top of the world?" Maybe the Beach Boys predicted it. Last summer, the Hawaiian surfing champs Garrett McNamara and Kealii Mamala caught a wave on top of the planet, becoming the first people ever to ride a tsunami made by an ice wall collapsing in the Arctic. For about a minute they skimmed along in a hail of rock and ice. How would McNamara rate this new form of extreme surfing? "I wouldn't recommend it," he said.

Still, there will probably be more chances for those who want to try. Most climatologists outside the Bush administration now concur that the Arctic is melting like a candle, and a good deal faster than anyone expected. In 2007 parts of the Arctic Ocean reached 8F above normal, another record, while Nasa satellite data reported at summer's end just half the volume of Arctic ice there had been 48 months before. "It's beyond our worst-case scenarios," says Michael Byers, professor of global politics at the University of British Columbia, "and quite terrifying in terms of its potential scope." Or, as Mark Serreze, senior scientist at a Colorado "snow-and-ice data centre", recently told the Associated Press: "The Arctic is screaming."

The question is, will it scream alone? Further south, from ski resorts to French vineyards to the Indian Ocean's Maldives (one of the first nations likely to vanish as the waters rise), anxieties over unchecked global warming are ratcheting up to the point where a small nuclear war begins to have its attractions: it could cool things down about 2F as soot blocks out the sun. Failing that – or a huge carbon tax – we're toast. Most of us, that is. For if climate change imperils the world at large, for a lucky few it's the knock of opportunity.

"You can't fight it. You have to accept it. The question is, how do we win by it?" That's the silk-purse philosophy of Mike Spence, the 51-year-old mayor of Churchill, in Canada's Manitoba province. Of the handful of countries that stand to gain by climate change, his tops the list: the Canadian Arctic comprises 40% of the second-largest nation on Earth, and, conceivably, a giant thaw could one day turn all that white waste into the new Illinois. But that's all speculation, pie in the sky. In Churchill, Spence has already seen benefits. Thanks to climate change, his town has a future that's not just bright but world-class.

For the moment, Churchill, population 923, is still a grim, wind-bitten little outpost on the southwestern coast of Hudson Bay. As the self-proclaimed polar-bear capital of the world, the place has survived for decades chiefly on the six weeks' worth of tourist dollars it gets each autumn, when the bears gather to start their migration northward over the ice. There's also some bird- and beluga-whale watching on offer in the summer months. Even so, before climate change, the town was in active decline. In 2007 the battered old Hudson Bay railroad, Churchill's one mainland link, was still notorious for derailments and delays. The port was built during the Depression and looks it. Meanwhile, though Hudson Bay opens out into the Atlantic, it has been frozen solid for nine months of the year for at least a millennium, drastically limiting its use. In the early 1990s, shipping, never lively, almost came to a stop. The Canadian government found the whole operation so weary, stale, flat and unprofitable that, in 1997, it ceded the port of Churchill to an American transportation-services firm called OmniTrax for the grand sum of $7.

Then temperatures started to rise.

When the wind is frisking at 10 below it seems hard to credit, but the shift has been implacable, especially lately: the past three summers have been very mild, with a "warm freeze" last autumn. There has been less snow too. "Normally we wouldn't be using this door," says a white-haired Gavin Lawrie, the owner of the Aurora Inn, pointing to a side exit. "And this is the first time I can remember not having to shovel a trail on those outside stairs." This warming trend has meant the bay is now navigable four months a year instead of three, and it won't stop there. Even the experts don't claim to know just how fast it will happen, but the harbour could open up six months, nine, even all-year-round, while the 21st century is still young. "Churchill will become a viable port many months of the year fairly soon," is the closest Dr Byers will predict. But when the Inuit start buying air-conditioning units in the Arctic, as they have, it can't be very long.

In short, whether climate change has been a nice surprise, as OmniTrax's managing director, Michael Ogborn, avers, or the company shrewdly saw it coming, its takeover of Canada's only deep-water Arctic port is starting to look like the smartest buy since New York went for $24 in beads. For, thanks to the coming revolution in shipping, Churchill is poised to leap from municipal amoeba to world hub. Even a seasonally ice-free Arctic, likely within 10 years, would change the transport game dramatically. Vessels from Europe or northeast Asia, now ploughing centuries-old routes across the mid-

Atlantic, would be able to follow the shorter northern arc into Churchill instead, cutting time by up to 40%.

Most of the populace welcomes the thought of living in a boom town, though not necessarily because it will get warmer. Randy Spence, cousin to the mayor and industrial mechanic at the port, says he visited Hawaii once, but that his happiest memory is of standing out on the beach in a cold rain. Still, he says: “If everything’s melting [here] like they say, it’s going to benefit a lot of people.” Other townsfolk are “positive and upbeat” about it. Or as a former town councillor put it, with a little more bite: “It’s our turn.”

That might well be the motto of the new Canada, which until now has been lumbered with a recurring inferiority complex. (A few years back a newspaper, hoping to put some colour into the country’s wan self-image, asked readers to complete this phrase: “As Canadian as?” The winning entry was: “As Canadian as possible under the circumstances.”) Now, while many Canadians certainly abhor global warming, there’s an undeniable sense of a nation getting a bit of its own back. Government officials led by Stephen Harper, the prime minister, appeared in Churchill in September vowing a $68m upgrade to the town and its decrepit railroad. Meanwhile, there are efforts to hasten here what global warming has begun. “We’re not just waiting for the ice to melt,” says Ron Lemieux, Manitoba’s palpably eager transportation minister. Already some ships are being toughened with an extra inch of steel to speed them through Hudson Bay’s softening ice. But Lemieux wants to do more immediately. “Nuclear icebreakers could keep that port open for 12 months a year,” he says, an idea for which he is “lobbying hard”. He also has a surprising ally.

Repeated offers to break up Churchill’s harbour ice have come from the Russians, who foresee a bonanza for themselves. The Russian ambassador Georgy E Mamedov, described as “ebullient” on the subject of Churchill, has swept through town spreading goodwill – even at the “polar-bear jail”, a holding pen for rogues and strays, where he spoke to them confidingly in his native tongue. Perhaps he was sharing with them the dream of a historic “Arctic bridge” between Churchill and Murmansk, a much larger but (for the moment) equally depressed town on Russia’s north coast. Today a ship leaving there for Canada navigates the Atlantic, the St Lawrence Seaway and the Great Lakes, on its way to Thunder Bay in Ontario. Elapsed time: 17 days. The Murmansk-to-Churchill run can be made in eight. In October came the first preview of this glorious partnership, when the Russian vessel Kapitan Sviridov carried a load of fertiliser into Churchill in a burst of publicity and pot-banging. Not all the hopefulness is economic: one port worker here thinks global warming could help reduce depression, lethargy and fist fights. The weather will remain too mean by temperate-zone standards for the town to bloom into a full-scale metropolis in the near future. But given enough time and enough worldwide policy failure, anything is possible.

Outside Churchill it’s a different story. Just to the north, in the province of Nunavut, about 30,000 Inuit face climate-driven changes equally drastic and far less benign. “We’re getting robins and new bugs, like grasshoppers,” says Peter Irniq, an Inuit activist, and in the Arctic these are not happy harbingers of spring: they coincide with reports of people falling through the ice, animal herds declining, winds ripping roofs out of season. Irqit recognises that global warming here could have its plus points. Supplies will arrive more swiftly from Churchill; a tourist boom would be “good for arts and crafts”. But selling more beadwork would hardly make up for an ecosystem in freefall. “We might see more disease in caribou with mosquitoes,” he says.

“If animals that we eat get sick, what are we going to eat? How are we going to survive?”

Churchill’s famous polar bears could ask the same thing: once the town’s biggest asset, they may have no place in the new age of prosperity. For at least 11,000 years, since the last ice age, they have gathered each autumn at the edge of Hudson Bay, waiting for the freeze that will send them north across the ice, hunting seals and other prey. But more and more global warming is delaying that migration. Less time on the ice means less to eat, and that means thinner bears and fewer births. (“I can’t tell you the last time we saw triplets here,” a local man says.) Since the mid-1980s, researchers say, Churchill’s bear population has already dropped from 1,200 to less than 1,000.

Coasting by helicopter out of town and across the wide, white tundra, you can almost see it happening: it’s deep into November, and normally the bears would have gone north by now. But there are still some down below, moving singly or in twos or threes, yellow-white blots against the snow. A few ramble along the edge of the bay, looking for the good, hard ice that will carry them north to food, but they can find no solid entry point. Instead they’re confronted with broken hunks of “pancake ice”.

“If things keep going the way they are,” says John Talon, a helicopter pilot, “the bears will be gone by 2040. That’s a terrifying thought.” Just below, a mother with cub in tow is stretching way out, pawing the floes, looking for a way forward. “That looks dangerous,” a passenger says.

“It is dangerous. She’s so eager to get out onto the ice, she’s taking a chance there.”

Talon says 2040, but nobody really knows. One generation, two, three – estimates vary on how long it will take for the animals to abandon the area if climate change goes unchecked. But sooner or later, in the tart view of Dr Jane Waterman, a US wildlife biologist, “the bears are not going to be able to adapt unless they go out and learn how to drink Slurpees [iced drinks].” Whether or not polar bears will become extinct in the wild is a matter of sharp debate; some dismiss that fear as another instance of alarmist “climate porn”. In December, the BBC reported the discovery of a Norwegian polar-bear jawbone at least 110,000 years old, suggesting to some that having survived warm-temperature surges before, the bears can do it again. One blogging biologist offers this hope: “One of the outcomes of polar bears being forced off the ice is the apparently increasing number of hybrid polar bears being found – part-polar, part-grizzly. Usually this is seen as a

‘bad’ thing, a potential ‘dilution’ of the polar-bear gene pool, leading to its disappearance. Not so. Rather, this may be one way for the polar-bear genes to survive a warm spell until the ice comes back.”

If that’s what passes for optimism in the 21st century, Churchill’s bears really do have something to worry about, to say nothing of the other local fauna. Tour guide Kelsey Eliasson claims the area is “the best place to view wildlife in Canada”: caribou, moose, silver fox, a hundred varieties of birds – it’s all here. In summer there’s a beluga-whale convention in Hudson Bay. But today, with 40% of the world’s species already moving north, there are early signs of turmoil. “The whole ecosystem is changing there,” Lemieux says of Churchill. “For the first time, killer whales are turning up in Hudson Bay, and they are feeding on the belugas.” Paradoxically, in the short term, bears are easier to see than usual: balked in their efforts to migrate, they turn up in town more often looking for food and giving tourists an edgy thrill. (Still, says local wildlife officer Shaun Bobier, nobody has been killed by a polar bear in town since 1983, “and that was an individual walking down the street with meat in his pockets”.)

Given threats of this magnitude, one might expect that leaders of Churchill’s tourist industry, which is built on wildlife, would be mobilising to protect it. But repeatedly they say the danger is overblown. “The numbers [of polar bears] are declining? According to whom?” says Paul Ratson of Nature First Tours. His chief complaint about the bears is that they’re being “drugged too much and handled too much. I’d like to see a moratorium on research”.

Asked if she feels that her livelihood is being threatened, Valerie Kelly of Great White Bear Tours says: “Gosh, no. If anything, tourism is increasing. I’m not sure if [climate change] is going to be that significant.” The fact is, after a long spell of scientists, journalists and other nervous nellies descending on them like crazed gulls, tour operators have developed a kind of bunker mentality against outsiders telling them what to think and what to do. In his Polar Bear Alley blog, Kelsey Eliasson speaks for many: “Climate change in the media, and even in science now, is too skewed for me to buy into any more. A lot of us feel that only the most alarming statistics are being circulated, and that if you do not simply agree that the ‘polar bears are in peril’ you [will] simply be dismissed as ‘having your head in the sand’. ‘The polar bears are starving’ is almost a local joke now.”

This leaves the tourist business, to a large extent, in passive league with the money men, the architects of Churchill’s global future. Every day the ground gets softer, and more holes are drilled in it: for the past two years the port has been funnelling mining equipment into the vicinity, gravel trucks, bulldozers, everything needed to pull nickel and palladium out of the long-frozen earth – even real treasure, like diamonds and gold. “The government gave out mining claims on thousands of acres of our tourist routes,” Eliasson says. “About 12 miles east of town the government has leased mining rights, mineral rights. They cover half the tundra with vehicle trails.” Even on the still-dilapidated rail line “grain took priority over passengers this year,” he says. “I don’t remember it being like that before.” As Paul Ratson says, “Any place jobs and the environment clash, jobs always win. It doesn’t matter what we want. It’s like it or leave.”

Or maybe get drunk. It’s not as if Churchill was the only bet to strike it rich in the age of global warming; Greenland’s fabled icecap, stretching 660,000 square miles, may be melting like a popsicle on a hot porch; and yes, if it goes completely it will raise worldwide sea levels by 20ft. But, in the meantime, a successful new company called Greenland Brewhouse is making beer with pristine runoff from the big melt. Guaranteed at least 2,000 years old and free of pollutants, this glacier water is billed as the key to producing a smoothly superior beverage. (Roger Protz of Britain’s Good Beer Guide has pronounced it “beautifully nutty”.)

Global warming may even provide a sort of consolation prize to the tourist industry, giving it something to sell as its traditional staples recede. A niche market in “climate tourism” is gaining strength, often featuring field trips to scenes of environmental disaster. This partially accounts for the jump in Arctic tourism, up 50% since 1990. Recently, off Norway, a climate-tour cruise ship was rewarded with the collapse of an ice wall that sent water slamming into the ship. “That was exciting,” said a 68-year-old matron, hugging the rail.

It’s this death-watch mentality that Kelsey Eliasson and others in Churchill stubbornly resist. Perhaps it explains, in part, their reluctance to believe the sky is falling. “I’m tired of reading about polar bears’ penises getting smaller,” Eliasson says. “I’m tired of people coming to Churchill to see bears before they’re gone. I want them to come not because of a checklist or from a sense of guilt. I want people to come see the wildlife because it’s wonderful.”

Charlatan (Orion, £20), by Pope Brock, is out now