Silent Snow: A Review

Silent Snow, by Marla Cone, highlights the ironic poisoning of the most remote places on earth due to high rates of pollutants such as DDT and PCBs produced by the rest of the world. The book focuses on the top predators of the arctic region: Polar Bears, Seals, and Humans. The main issue at hand, the poisoning of the arctic, is due to many factors. Large amounts of DDT, PCBs, and Mercury end up in the food of arctic natives and Polar Bears. These pollutants come from around the globe due to manufacturing, coal burning, and ore mining, but the people she focuses on are located in the arctic region. The data and references made are accurate to the late 90s and early 2000s. The author started writing the book in 1995 and published it in 2005. The issue of pollutants invading the arctic is an ongoing problem. Cone’s suggestion solution would be to reduce the amount of mercury and PCBs entering the environment so the planet has a chance to absorb the pollutants already in the system. I choose this book because much like the author, I expected the most polluted people to be from a major city, not the remote arctic. The subject matter seemed fascinating and the book had very positive reviews.

Cone tells the story of the poisoning of the arctic mainly by telling the stories of natives of the region. I loved this because it made the issue at hand seem much more personal and fleshed out rather than just an abstract concept that is happening somewhere to something. The first of the stories she tells is of the Inuit of Greenland. The focus is mainly on the remote village of Qaanaaq, Greenland, but information is drawn from all over Greenland. The writing style Cone uses is incredible; she paints beautiful landscapes with her words and it kept me very engaged with the story. This use of language came in handy when describing the hunt of the Inuits. There were times where I cringed at the death of a whale or seal due to the descriptive language, but it brought the story alive. The Inuits have an incredible amount of respect for nature and animals. It is an integral part of their culture and traditions. Their thought is that they want their food to have lived wild and free, and the fight to bring them down is a respectful battle between hunter and pray. Multiple interviewees spoke about how they don’t understand how Americans and other parts of the world can treat their food with such disrespect. How cows and chickens are raised and experience life full of suffering at the hands of the farmers. They also speak about how Americans are so detached from death and that we get our meat in little plastic packages and don’t think about the sacrifice that was made to feed us. The authors words are much better than my own, and this section had a bigger impact on me emotionally than if it were just presented as a straight interview.

 Another focus of the author is the irony and impacts of global legislation on natives of the arctic region. Once again the author really humanizes what is normally presented as dry legislation or a one sided conversation. There are many environmental groups that oppose whale and seal hunting. This is an opinion that is shared by most of the American population as well. There is valid concern when it comes to whaling, but that should be focused on commercial overfishing and whaling, not on native hunting practices. Cone provides a great platform for the native people of the arctic to air their grievances about global legislation and the imperfect logic that allows for these restrictions to be passed. It isn’t her interpretation of their feelings and plight, it is well integrated quotes that share these facts. There is a limit on the number of seals and whales that the natives of Greenland can hunt in a year. This is an unnecessary restriction for a couple of reasons. One, the animals on the restricted hunting list are not endangered species, nor are they experiencing any abnormal reduction in population that is less severe than being an endangered species. The only time in history these animals were overfished was when westerners were hunting them for whalebone, a popular flexible product used in corsets and umbrellas in the 1800s. The practices of native hunting has never threatened population levels of marine animals, it is only when commercial whalers get involved that it is an issue. The author also does a good job of putting into perspective how bad these issues are. Not only are the restrictions unnecessary, the amount of food from that number of marine mammals that can be hunted is about 20% short of what the Inuit need. Cone goes into the numbers in an accessible way to communicate the discrepancies at hand.

Everything in the arctic is being poisoned by global pollutants, but besides humans, polar bears are the other top predator that is suffering. Cone is able to go into the science of pollution and the biological effects on polar bears without overwhelming or losing the reader. The subject of focus in this section is scientist whose field of study is the effect of pollutants on polar bears. She introduces the topic then takes a sideline to restate what DDT and PDBs are to refresh the readers understanding. No prior knowledge of pollution is needed, making the content educational and accessible. Cone is also very detailed in her storytelling. When describing the process of a polar bear hunt and sample, she goes through all the steps instead of just saying that the researcher tranquilizes the polar bear and takes samples. The perspective of the researcher really takes front seat. He first talks about the dangers of taking helicopters out in the arctic. The conversations between the researcher and his crew play out naturally and immersivity. They scourer for tracks in the snow to find polar bears because they are so hard to spot against the white background. Once a polar bear is spotted, the helicopter is lowered and a crew member uses a tranquilizer gun to subdue the bear. The researchers take samples of blood, hair, a skin biopsy, and then tag the bear with an x to say that it has been sampled for the season. I felt like I really understood this process because the author was so detailed and descriptive without being overly wordy or boring.

The only area of the book that was a bit lacking was the solutions. There isn’t much an average person can do. The pollutants discussed by the author are produced by manufacturers. The only thing to do is to reduce the production of these pollutants and hope that nature can absorb and process the large amount of pollutants in the system already. Something I would have loved was if there was an update to the book. It has been almost 20 years since it was published, it has been over 20 years since the author started writing it. Some books do a revised epilogue and provides an update on the situation to readers. This would have been a fabulous book to do that. I would love to know if there has been any improvement in the volume of pollutants in the Inuit or the results of the long-term studies on their children to track developmental issues. I know that this is not an expectation, it just would have been really interesting to have that comparison of data at hand.

I loved this book and would give it a five out of five stars. My enjoyment was mainly tied to the literary style of writing the author used, rather than a dry, fact heavy style that science books typically have. Because of this, I would recommend this book to anyone high school age and up, as it is very accessible and doesn’t require a lot of prior knowledge of pollution. Any younger and this book would be a bit challenging of a read due to the topic and some parts that are a bit graphic. I think environmental animal lovers should read this book as well because it could change some opinions on restrictions on marine mammal hunting. I was able to find two pier reviewed journal reviews, and I agreed with the content of both of them. The first one was by JoAnne Valenti. Her review had a nice personal touch because she knows the author professionally and personally. I don’t think this made her review detrimentally biased because she referenced a lot of the content to entice the reader to check out the book. She also voiced an opinion on the book, something that I expect from a book review. This is something that was missing from the second review that I found by Laurence Marschall. While I liked the parts of the book that she referenced, all she did was write a long synopsis. He didn’t voice a stance on the book nor whether or not she recommends it. The fact that he published this review in Natural History gives the impression that he liked it and recommends it to the readers of this journal, but it isn’t specified in the review. Both reviews were positive and focused on points that I enjoyed about the book. The authors descriptive language, the lack of prior knowledge needed to enjoy the book, and the enjoyably educational nature of the book. All in all, a great read despite the sad subject matter. The beauty with which the author writes about such a dark topic gives it a respectful elegance that the arctic deserves.