

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

FEATURE

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POLAR BEARS BEING STUDIED LIKE NEVER BEFORE

The world's polar bear population--the subject of intense study for the past several years--appears stable with a conservative estimate of 20,000 animals worldwide, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported to Congress recently.

The greatest threat to these bears is posed by oil and gas exploration, drilling, and extraction on the North Slope of Alaska. Human activity in and near denning areas could cause fewer bears to come ashore to den and, therefore, den on the sea ice. It could also prompt mother bears to desert land dens earlier than normal, taking cubs to sea prematurely. Oil spills from offshore drilling rigs or tankers could reduce the insulating value of the bears' fur as well as damage the food chain below these carnivores. There is a potential for development along the entire north Alaska coast from Point Hope to the Canadian border.

This information was published in the Administration and Status Report of the Marine Mammal Protection Act submitted to Congress in late 1976. A limited number of copies are available to the public by writing to the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. 20240.

Polar bears occur only in the northern hemisphere in association with Arctic sea ice at six isolated locations ringing the polar region and including the territorial waters of the United States, Canada, Denmark, Norway, and the Soviet Union. Even in waters so far north these bears today carry traces of mercury, DDT, and PCB's.

Protection afforded the polar bear varies. In the United States, the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 transferred management authority for polar bears to the Federal Government and limited the kill to Alaskan coastal Eskimos for subsistence or for manufacture of traditional native articles of clothing or handicraft. A request by the State of Alaska for return of management authority for polar bears is now under review by the Interior Department. The plan proposed by the State would allow both recreational and subsistence hunting.

The Soviet Union has not allowed polar bear hunting since 1956. Norway stopped hunting in 1971 and enacted a 5-year moratorium on all killing in 1973. In Greenland only Eskimos or long-term residents may kill bears using traditional ground hunting. In Canada since 1968 hunting has been regulated with quotas.

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The annual world harvest of polar bears was estimated at about 900 during 1976. Heavy ice conditions around St. Lawrence Island and the northwest coast of Alaska brought more bears within reach of Eskimos last year and 150 to 160 were killed. The Canadian kill was 600. Greenland residents took 125 to 150. The Soviet Union allows 10 to 15 cubs to be taken each year for zoos.

In November 1973 the five polar bear nations drafted an Agreement on Conservation of Polar Bears to allow bears to be taken only in areas where they have been taken by traditional means in the past. Further, it prohibits the use of aircraft or large motorized vessels in taking bears.

The agreement calls for national and cooperative international research and management of polar bears. This agreement was ratified by the United States Senate on September 10, 1976.

In 1975 and 1976, American and Soviet scientists met in Leningrad and Moscow to develop long-range research goals for marine mammals. Various research programs have been initiated by the Fish and Wildlife Service in the past year, the most ambitious of which is to conduct satellite tracking of radio-collared bears to document their distribution, migration, and denning patterns. Work is also being done on a telemetry device to be attached to the radio collar so that accurate physiological data such as body temperature and heart rate can be monitored from afar. Other studies are focused on the basic biology of polar bears and include their diet, health, and mortality factors. In all, over \$1 million in research money was spent on polar bears in 1976.

Polar bears are solitary animals most of the year. During spring breeding, males seek out females by following their tracks on the sea ice. The male and female remain together only long enough to breed, then the male seeks another female. Pregnant females den in the fall under banks along the coast of rivers or on slopes where snow drifts. The pregnant female forms a depression in the snow, then enlarges a denning chamber as snow drifts over her. Young weighing less than 2 pounds are born in December with a litter of two most common. They remain in the den until late March when the cubs weigh about 15 pounds. The family group then travels to the sea ice. Young remain with the mother about 28 months. Most bears don't live beyond 25 years. Mature females off Alaska weigh from 400 to 650 pounds, mature males weigh from 600 to 1,300 pounds.

Polar bears feed primarily on ringed seals. They occasionally eat carrion, including whale, walrus, seal, small mammals, birds, eggs, and vegetation when other food is not available. Polar bear liver is toxic to humans because of high vitamin A content. Because of their dependence on ringed seals, any ecological change affecting seals would affect polar bears.

At present conflicts exist over protection of the polar bear. Non-native residents of the Arctic Circle feel discriminated against. New conflicts will doubtless arise as development proceeds in the arctic.



Polar bears off Cape Lisburne, Alaska. Black and white glossy available to editors by calling 202/343-8770.