

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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POLAR BEARS HAVE A CHANCE, SCIENTISTS CONCLUDE

Prospects for survival of polar bears (Ursus maritimus) are good--if mankind is careful--scientists from five nations surrounding the north pole have concluded.

Wildlife experts from the United States, Canada, Norway, Denmark, and the Soviet Union met at Morges, Switzerland, early in February to discuss the endangered status of the great white bears. The meeting was sponsored by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN).

The United States was represented by James W. Brooks of the Interior Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife and Jack W. Lentfer of Alaska's Department of Fish and Game.

All the scientists noted the increasing economic development in the Arctic, and expressed concern that major ecological problems could arise from oil spills, off-shore drilling, and other economic activity.

But the scientists still lack information on how many polar bears there are--estimates range between 8,000 and 20,000. From tagging and other research, however, identifiable bear populations have been located in: (1) Spitsbergen-Franz Joseph Land-east Greenland region, (2) Hudson Bay region of Canada, (3) high Canadian Arctic, (4) high Canada-eastern Alaska region, (5) western Alaska-eastern USSR region.

Brooks, who has tagged more than 150 polar bears for the Federal Government during the past two years, believes about 3,500 exist in the latter two regions, which include United States territory.

He noted that about 300 polar bears are killed by legal hunting in these regions each year, but said that his research has not indicated any decline in overall populations of this species in recent years.

Polar bear hunting in Alaska is administered by the State, for the animal is a "resident species," is not on the Interior Department's list of rare or endangered species, and the Federal Government has no jurisdiction over it. The IUCN reports that the polar bear is totally protected in the USSR. It is also protected in certain reserves of Norway and Canada. IUCN scientists estimated the total 1968 polar bear kill by hunters at 1,250.

Following the Morges sessions, Brooks departed for an Air Force radar site at Cape Lisburne on Alaska's northwest coast, his base of operations until about April 1, 1970. During this time, Brooks hopes to tag about 50 more animals and test some heat-sensitive scanning equipment which might help locate bears and make aerial surveys more feasible.

Brooks points out that polar bears are one of the most wide-ranging animals, and "because of their white fur, polar bears are difficult to spot. An individual bear may travel 30 to 50 miles a day on an ice pack which may also be moving at about the same rate."

When Brooks tags bears, he works alone, except for his aircraft pilot. A tranquilizing shot is fired into the animal's hind quarters, then a tag is placed in one of the ears.

"Tagging is not a good means of determining populations," says Brooks, "but it gives us a better idea of migration, and this might make it possible to increase international cooperation in behalf of these magnificent carnivores of the Arctic no-man's land."

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