

ALASKA'S POLAR BEARS, always prized as unique big game animals, will be taking on added stature now that the state has banned airplane hunting, and both the bears and the hunters are bound to benefit.

Laws passed by the Board of Fish and Game in April prohibit any use of aircraft in hunting polar bears beginning with the 1972-73 season which is scheduled for Oct. 15 - May 31. The airplane ban should eliminate most of the illegal and aesthetically objectionable aspects of polar bear hunting, and with hunters limited to dog sleds and snow machines, the annual take is expected to drop accordingly.

In urging the ban on aircraft, the Department of Fish and Game also held that illegal airplane hunting provided considerable potential for overharvest of the polar bear population.

"While there has been no indication that the population is endangered, we estimate that the illegal take may have been as high as one-third of the reported harvest in 1970," said Jack Lentfer, department biologist in charge of the polar bear program. "Because illegal hunting from aircraft is so difficult to control, the best way to avoid an overharvest is to prohibit all airplane hunting."

The possibility that the federal government or an international commission might take polar bear management away from the State of Alaska, should airplane hunting continue, was another important factor behind the decision to halt the practice.

While the regulation change will protect the bears and reduce illegal activity, Lentfer sees the upgrading of the hunting experience as one of the most important benefits stemming from the board's decision.

"Many persons, both hunters and nonhunters, objected to the use of planes as unaesthetic and unsportsmanlike and the practice certainly lacked the attributes of a quality hunting experience," Lentfer said.

As generally practiced in Alaska, airplane hunting involved the use of two planes: one to land the hunter near the polar bear and the other to herd the bear to him. The system had been widely condemned as violating "fair chase" ethics of hunting, and bears taken with the use of planes were not considered as trophies by the Boone and Crockett Club.

Even so, there were many hunters who desired to hunt in this manner and pilot-guides soon spotted the profit potential. Hunters paid \$1,500 to \$3,000 for an airplane hunt out of arctic villages such as Barrow, Kotzebue, Teller and Point Hope, but for many the experience turned out to be less than satisfactory.

"Some guides, anxious to reduce expenses, hurried hunters into shooting the first legal bear spotted. Those who looked forward to a real outdoor experience were disappointed by the 'quickie' aspects of the hunt and the commercialization of the polar bear," Lentfer said.

"Now, with hunting transportation limited to snow

## New deal for

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# polar bear

Jack Lentfer photo



machines or dog sleds, the true sportsman will be more likely to obtain the quality hunting experience he has the right to expect, and he'll be proud of his trophy and the way in which it was obtained," he added.

Lentfer, an internationally recognized polar bear expert, noted that before airplane hunting became widespread, natives along Alaska's arctic coast took an average of 118 polar bears per year. "This shows that bears can be hunted from shore, and since this type of hunting is generally confined to within 15 miles of the coast, there would be no possibility of overharvesting," he stated.

Alaska's total known harvest in 1971 was 203 bears. The Department of Fish and Game issued sport permits to 300 persons that year, but only 176 took bears. Natives killed the other 27 for subsistence use.

Natives will also benefit from the airplane ban as they will obtain most of the business for guiding snow machine and dog sled hunts. Fees are expected to be about \$50 a day for a 10-day hunt, with an additional \$1,000 charge if a polar bear is killed. Most of this money is expected to go into the village economy, rather than to airplane guides from other parts of Alaska.

The new regulations also should reduce the traffic in illegal hides.

"Some guides, in addition to their legitimate hunting activities, have been taking bears for the hides which we understand can be sold up to \$2,000 on the black market in the Lower 48. This illegal activity has been possible because the pilot guides had a legitimate reason to be in the polar bear hunting areas.

"With airplane hunting prohibited, probably only a few pilots will travel to the arctic to hunt illegally, and they could be watched closely," Lentfer says.

Now that the airplane is outlawed, Lentfer's polar bear tagging program is ending this year. About 500 bears have been tagged in cooperation with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service since the program started in 1967. Compilation of data will continue and results of the study will be used in cooperation with other polar nations to guide management policies for polar bears.

Lentfer's studies to date have produced at least two important discoveries about the polar bears of Alaska:

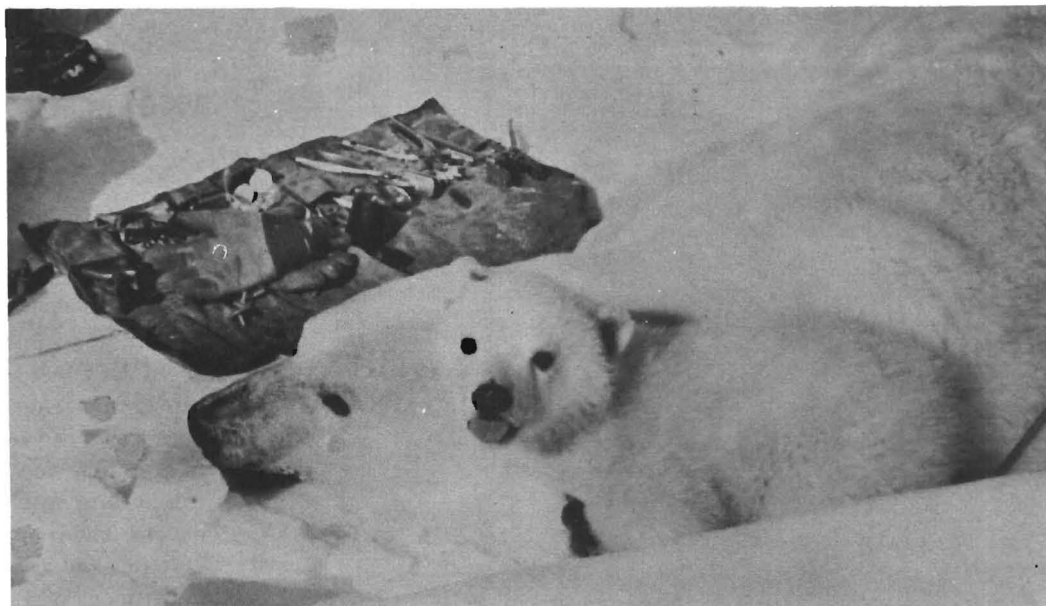
1--There are two distinct populations of polar bears off Alaska's arctic coast--one to the north and the other to the west.

2--Some polar bears den and give birth on the sea ice.

Recovery of tagged bears shows that the bears found off the coast north of Alaska tend to stay in that general area and have only a limited exchange with bears to the west of Alaska.

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*TAGGING PROGRAM -- Data collected from bear study is used to develop management policies and has resulted in important discoveries concerning polar bear populations.*



#### **BEARS** *(Cont'd. from page 13)*

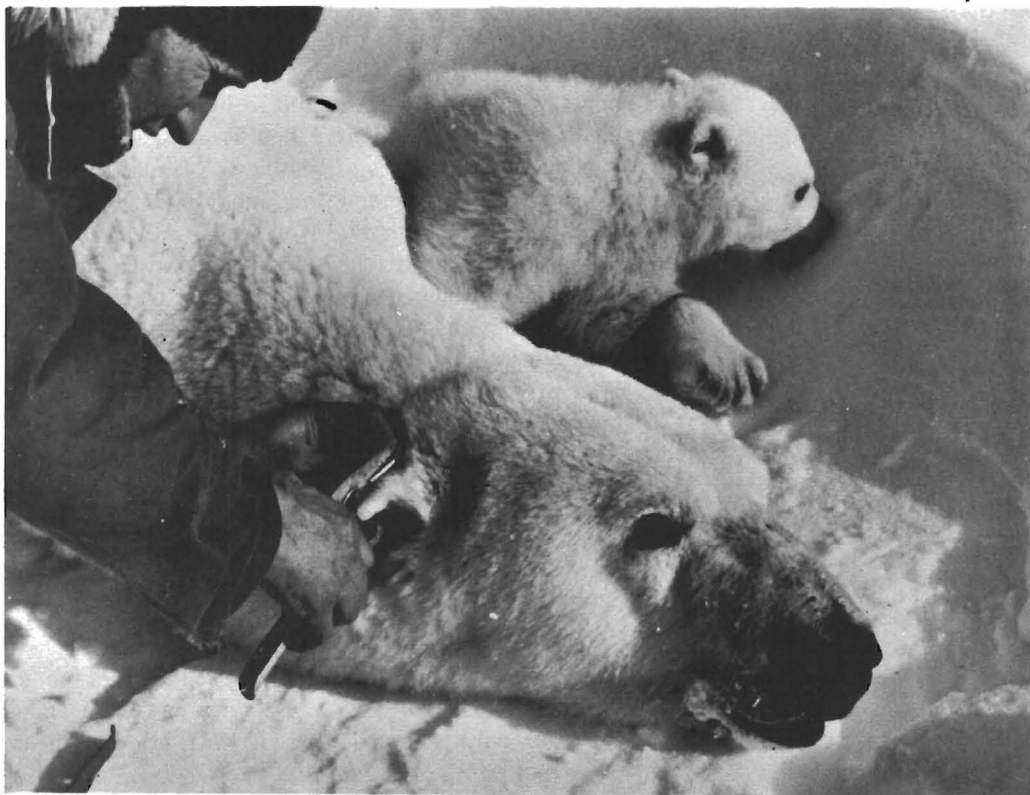
This finding refutes the old theory that bears travel randomly around the Arctic Ocean and means that each nation with polar bears can and should develop its own management plan for populations which live exclusively off its coasts. Where bear populations cross an international boundary, the nations involved should develop cooperative management plans, Lentfer believes.

"The fact that bears den and give birth on the ice north of Alaska also strengthens the concept of an Alaskan

population and points out the need for regional management plans," Lentfer says.

Further research in cooperation with the recently initiated Canadian tagging program to the east of Alaska will lead to even more refined management programs. This will continue to insure perpetuation of this important species while enabling the sportsman to enjoy a quality hunting experience in Alaska's arctic. ■

**RMB photos**



*MARKING TIME--Cub waits for biologists to finish tagging its mother. Studies have found that some bears are born on the ice north of Alaska.*



***Alaska***

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