

Polar Bears: An International Resource

by Jack Lentfer

Polar bears are truly an international resource, occurring on the high seas of the north polar basin and adjacent coastal areas of five nations--Canada, Greenland, Norway, the Soviet Union, and the United States. A number of cooperative management and research agreements and activities reflect this international status.

The first international polar bear meeting was convened by U.S. Senator Bob Bartlett at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1965. Representatives from the five nations with polar bears attended and presented information on status of stocks and management and research activities. A lack of knowledge and a need for more research was highlighted.

The Fairbanks meeting provided impetus for a follow-up meeting of polar bear specialists convened by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Switzerland in 1968. This resulted in formation of the International Polar Bear Specialist Group. The specialist group, which meets every two to three years, provides a forum for exchange of information on management and research and for planning cooperative programs. The Fairbanks meeting and formation of the IUCN Polar Bear Specialist Group focused much attention on polar bears, and resulted in increased funding for research.

A key accomplishment of the Polar Bear Specialist Group was the International Polar Bear Agreement finalized in Oslo in 1973 and ratified so it became effective in 1976. The United States, the U.S.S.R., Canada, Denmark (representing Greenland), and Norway are signatories to the Agreement.

The Agreement is based on the premise that individual nations have the ability to manage polar bear populations on and adjacent to their coasts. It creates a de facto high seas sanctuary for bears by not allowing them to be taken with the aid of aircraft and large motorized boats, or in areas where they have not been taken by traditional means in the past. It does provide for hunting by nationals of the five polar bear countries in their respective countries. The Agreement states that nations shall protect the ecosystems of which polar bears are a part and emphasizes the need for protection of habitat components such as denning and feeding areas of migration routes. The Agreement also states that countries shall conduct national research, coordinate management and research for populations that occur in more than one area of national jurisdiction, and exchange research results and harvest data. Resolutions appended to the Agreement request the establishment of an international hide-marking system to control traffic in illegal hides, the protection of cubs and females with cubs, and the prohibi-

tion of hunting in denning areas when bears are moving into them or are in dens.

Many of the provisions of the Agreement are being complied with. The United States is not completely in conformance, however, because the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency responsible for management of polar bears, has not enacted regulations implementing the Agreement. There are as yet no regulations protecting cubs, females with cubs, and bears in dens. Also, polar bear habitat vulnerable to oil and gas exploration and development is not afforded consistent protection in Alaska.

Another international agreement is the Polar Bear Management Agreement for the Southern Beaufort Sea, entered into in January 1988 by the Inuvialuit Game Council of northwest Canada and the North Slope Borough Fish and Game Management Committee of northern Alaska. The area covered by the Agreement is the southern Beaufort Sea from approximately Baillie Islands, Canada, in the east to Icy Cape, U.S.A., in the west. (Bears of the Chukchi Sea population to the west are not included.) The people covered by the Agreement are the Inuvialuit of Canada and the Inupiat of Alaska's North Slope.

International cooperation occurs in the field as well as at meetings and in management agreements. Over the years biologists from Alaska, Canada, Denmark (representing Greenland), and Norway have worked with one another on specific field projects. Recently the Soviet Union has become active in this regard. In late winter of 1989, two Soviet polar bear biologists worked with their Alaskan counterparts in northwestern Alaska applying radio-collars and exchanging information. A year later, three biologists from Alaska are working with Soviet biologists on the Soviet side of the Chukchi Sea. They are conducting denning surveys on Wrangel Island, Herald Island, and mainland coast of northwest Siberia and putting satellite transmitter collars on polar bears in these same locations, improving understanding of our shared resource.

Such cooperation could serve as a model for other species that occur in international waters or are shared by more than one nation.

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