

## REGIONAL REPORT-REGION V

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Presented to the Alaska Board of Game  
March 23, 1981

Thanks to the support of the Department's budget request by some members of last year's legislature, especially the Bush Caucus, funds available for surveys, harvest monitoring, personnel and research in Region V were substantially more than were available a year ago. This year some of the more costly operations included a census of the Western Arctic caribou herd, a muskox transplant in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, radio-collaring moose on the Seward Peninsula as part of a movements and population identity study, monitoring muskox hunts on Nunivak and Nelson Islands, and a wolf survey in Unit 23. Importantly, the Department's full staffing level was funded, and as a result of changing departmental priorities, two new game biologists have been assigned to the region and will be stationed at St. Marys and Ambler as assistant area biologist in Units 18 and 23, respectively. Hopefully in the future we will be able to provide you more accurate data on the status of wildlife populations in those areas as well as improve the communications between the resource users and managers.

Because of continued difficulty in acquiring housing in Barrow, we have been unsuccessful in recruiting to fill the vacant position there. As a result, data available for Unit 26 resources are limited. The area biologist position for Unit 18 has been filled and improved data regarding moose, muskox and beaver populations are now available. Because of fairly distinct and quite different resource uses in subunits 26(B) and 26(C) compared to the rest of Region V, administrative authority for 26(B) and (C) has been shifted to Region III. Most of the work being conducted by the Game Division in those subunits was by personnel stationed in Fairbanks where most other resource agency personnel having responsibility on the eastern North Slope are assigned.

As a result of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, nearly all of Unit 18 is now part of the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge. Unit 22 is mostly State, BLM, National Preserve or private land. Unit 23 is now divided into National Monument, Preserve, Park, Wildlife Refuge, Wilderness, Wild and Scenic River as well as lands owned or managed by private interests, the State, or BLM. The status of land in Unit 26 did not change as significantly except for a major expansion of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. However, the tempo of oil exploration in much of 26(A) will be increased. With such a mixture of land managers with different purposes, goals and directives, the management of wildlife populations will become more complex. The status of land in Unit 23 is as complex as anywhere in the state; because the Western Arctic Caribou herd will probably continue to utilize all areas in the unit regardless of land management authority, it's successful management will depend on the cooperative efforts of all involved landowners or managers.

Marine mammal management, or lack thereof, continues to be a real disappointment to us in Region V. Obviously with the majority of the region's population located along the coast, marine mammals are of considerable importance to the people, as moose are to Interior residents. The lack of any meaningful progress towards return of management of marine mammals to the State is frustrating.

Advisory Committee participation in some rural areas has deteriorated. Although the Boards now have additional staff support and the area game biologist in Region V assisted with logistical support, several committees were unable to conduct business because of lack of quorums. The Boards need full-time Advisory Committee coordinators located in the Bethel and Kotzebue areas to assist advisory committees to carry out their functions to provide you with meaningful, useful input on local issues. An assessment of Advisory Committee representation in Unit 26 should also be a priority for the Board's staff.

### Status of Game Populations

#### Brown Bear

Unit 18 - The reported brown bear take remains relatively low; however, nearly all bears taken are from two areas of the Unit. Three to four guides have operated in the Unit the last two years.

Units 22 and 23 - The harvest in 1980 in both these units was approximately one half that of 1979. This reduction was due in part to the shift by most guides to the Alaska Peninsula when the season opened there last spring, increased enforcement effort in the units, and the limitation of total number of permits available to nonresident hunters in the fall. As you may recall, brown bear hunting in these units was discussed in some detail last spring and the Board adopted regulations requiring nonresidents to obtain permits to hunt in all of Units 22 and 23 as well as shortening the spring season in Unit 22 for nonresidents. Residents were not required to obtain permits and their spring season was left unchanged. In addition all brown bears taken in Units 22 and 23 must be sealed in those Units. As these regulations became effective last July, only the fall season was affected and the harvest dropped from 44 bears in 1979 to 18 in 1980. Compliance with the sealing requirement appears good.

Unit 26 - Brown bear information for Unit 26 is included in the Region III report.

Summary - Brown Bear management in Region V as well as other rural areas presents one of the most interesting challenges to us as resource managers. Most rural residents in Region V are not particularly interested in taking brown bears and in fact many have a very low regard for bears. Unreported and unsalvaged bear killings have been a recurring problem, especially around reindeer herds and fish camps. There is a proposal (84) to open the season during the period local residents are fishing or berry picking, as a means of reducing bear-human conflicts. Each year the Department receives several requests to remove bears near reindeer herds, fish or berry camps. At the same time there is a keen interest

and demand by nonresidents to take brown bears and as demonstrated in 1979, the guiding industry can mobilize their hunters to take the bears. The solution seems so simple as one group is urging us to kill more bears and another group is urging us to allow them to kill more bears. Unfortunately many local residents fear that "outside" hunters or guides will not limit their take to bears, but will also take moose and caribou in direct competition with local users.

### Caribou

Western Arctic Caribou Herd - The recovery of this herd has been very encouraging. An aerial photo- direct count census was conducted in July and the population now appears to be approximately 140,000 caribou. The 1980 census was the most extensive since a similar survey in 1978. Unfortunately the caribou were split into several disjunct herds in 1980 and apparently never did coalesce into one large group as they did in 1970. Radio-collared caribou proved to be invaluable for locating groups of animals. In addition, the main calving area was flown extensively with fixed-wing aircraft so that it is unlikely any significant numbers of caribou were overlooked.

The population level is now close to that which the Board of Game established as the management goal for rebuilding the Western Arctic caribou herd. Harvest levels should be increased to slow the growth of the herd; however, the population level goal may need to be reexamined as the herd still has not moved into the Koyukuk valley in any significant numbers.

This is the first year that harvest tickets are being used as the principal means of assessing the caribou harvest. Because the season remains open until April 15, we will not have final harvest results until early summer. Preliminary analysis indicates that some hunters probably still are not obtaining their harvest tickets prior to hunting. Harvest assessments remains one of the weak points in our data for managing the recovery of the herd. Hopefully, stationing a biologist in the upper Kobuk area will improve harvest reports from that area.

There are several proposals addressing season and bag limit changes for the Western Arctic caribou herd. Based on public meetings in villages, particularly Unit 23, most hunters desire some form of either-sex season during the winter and spring.

### Moose

Unit 18 - The moose population continues to be very low in Unit 18 and most unit residents hunt in 19(A) or 21(E). Surveys have been flown the last two years on the lower Yukon and the difference in moose density in that portion of the Yukon in Unit 18 compared to that in 21(E) is remarkable although habitat appears similar. Lower Yukon residents have exhibited greater concern and awareness of the effects of illegal hunting on the establishment of a viable moose population in Unit 18. With a full-time biologist in the area and hopefully data from a study of movements on the lower Yukon, we should obtain greater compliance with the regulations and eventually a moose population more in line with what the habitat can support will result.

Unit 22 - Moose populations in Subunits 22(B), (D), and (E) remain healthy and appear to be stabilizing. Harvests levels in parts of 22(D) are comparable to yearling recruitment. Population levels in 22(A) and 22(C) appear to be below comparable habitat in other parts of the Unit.

Unit 23 - Weather conditions prevented us from completing several of the surveys last fall but populations on those areas surveyed were similar to previous years, with the largest population on the lower Noatak River. The population on the Buckland and parts of the Kobuk River systems remain below previous levels.

Unit 26 - The moose population on the Colville River system has remained at a remarkably stable level for the last 10 years. Yearling recruitment appears adequate to support the present level of harvest and natural mortality. Surveys are planned for this spring in 26(B) because more people are using the haul road for access to moose populations there.

#### Muskoxen

Unit 18 - The census and hunting seasons are still in progress but the data will be available when proposals 244 and 245 are considered. Preliminary census figures indicate that the Nunivak population may be somewhat less and the Nelson Island herd more than anticipated. The transplant of approximately 40 muskoxen from Nunivak to supplement the herds on the Seward Peninsula is scheduled to be completed during the last week of March.

#### Furbearers

Regionwide - In 1979 the Board adopted uniform trapping season dates for most terrestrial furbearers in Units 18, 22, 23 and 26. This was favorably received by most residents and there are only a few proposals for these species, mainly requests to extend the season for wolf, wolverine and otter. By far the majority of furbearer proposals in Region V have to do with liberalizing seasons, bag limits or methods and means on beaver. Beaver populations in most of the region have expanded faster than interest in trapping. Reported beaver harvests in Units 22 and 23 remain low; the harvest in Unit 23 is considerably below what the population could withstand. As a result the Board and Department have received complaints from residents of Unit 23 that beaver are blocking fish streams and have received requests to legalize shooting beaver during the spring season. Apparently trapping pressure is not going to increase significantly in response to market demands. Most beavers taken in Unit 23 are used locally and never enter the commercial market.

In Unit 18 the situation is more complex as the trapping pressure in parts of the Unit is sufficient to hold the beaver population in check while in other parts there is limited or no trapping pressure. More beaver were taken in Unit 18 during the 1979-1980 trapping season than any other year since statehood. The take of 2253 beaver (annual average 1268) by 179 trappers also represents the highest take per trapper in the 22-year period (12.6 beaver per trapper). The number of trappers has remained relatively constant during the last six years but their success improved considerably last year; 15 percent reported taking the

bag limit of 20 beavers. Areas with the highest reported harvests included the Johnson River, drainages flowing from the south to the Kuskokwim, and the lower Yukon River. The harvest in the Y-K Delta was the lowest in the Unit, and this is also the area where most complaints about beaver blocking fish streams originated. Most of the residents of this area have limited experience trapping beaver and apparently will not take beavers at a sufficient rate to limit the population's expansion.