

western arctic caribou

a herd in trouble.....



LIMITATIONS on the hunting of caribou in the western arctic herd have been adopted for the first time in two decades by the Alaska Board of Game. Under the provisions of the regulations adopted (5 AAC 81.050 - 81.070), a permit system has been instituted with a total of 3,000 permits.

These limitations were imposed following a public hearing by the Board of Game during a meeting in Fairbanks on Sept. 20-22, 1976. The areas affected are game management units 23, 24, and 26 A and B, all in the northwestern corner of the state. The number of permits issued was based on need and on a village by village basis within the game units. Most of unit 22 was recently closed by emergency regulation to protect part of the western arctic herd which is wintering in that area.

The limitation on caribou hunting for the western arctic herd resulted from a serious decline in caribou numbers in the area. The Fairbanks hearings elicited testimony from village residents, Native Corporations, conservation organizations and individuals. The permits issued

range from 10 for Atkasuk to 696 for Kotzebue.

The majority of those testifying at the Fairbanks hearing were in agreement on the limitations imposed as long as other steps were also taken. The need for increased enforcement of hunting regulations and programs to control wolf predation were listed among the foremost items of importance by those testifying at the meeting.

Hunters will not be permitted to hunt on the same day they are transported by air to the hunting grounds, equaling regulations in effect in most other units in the state. Animals taken in the affected game units must also be taken from the field immediately following harvest and the use of caribou for dog food is no longer allowed.

The season for the hunting of caribou, on a bull-only basis, extends from Oct. 1 through March 31 with one bull animal allowed for each permit. The limitation affected more than the range of the western arctic caribou herd with limits also being placed on caribou in Game Management Units 18, 21 and 22. These units extend from Bristol

Bay to the Seward Peninsula in western Alaska. In addition a limit was imposed on the eastern arctic (Porcupine) herd because of the concern that some of the hunting pressure from the Western Arctic would be transferred to the Porcupine herd. Game units 25 and 26C, both on the Canadian-Alaska border and extending from the Yukon River northward to the Arctic Ocean, basically support the Porcupine herd during the summer months.

The western arctic herd has been under intensive study by the department's game division following indications of a diminishing population. The herd was estimated to have peaked in the 1960's and a photocensus in 1970 yielded a reliable estimate of 242,000 animals. Another census in 1975, however, established a maximum number of 100,000 animals, with an even more intensive aerial search in July, 1976 showing a decline to about 60,000 animals.

In a departmental publication ("The Status of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd" available at departmental offices), reasons for the

(continued on page 4)

caribou *(continued from page 3)*

decline are enumerated. The report states, "it is apparent this herd has declined to its present size due to excessive use of caribou by humans, in combination with significant impact of natural mortality including predation, especially by wolves."

The report further explains, "caribou hunting by Alaska natives in this area has been intense." The nearly 10,000 residents of the affected area annually have taken 25,000-30,000 animals for their use. Wolves in the 140,000 square mile area have been estimated to take between 10,000 and 15,000 caribou per year. The report also notes, "because of the coincidence of oil development and the decline...it seems obvious to place some of the blame...on construction of the pipeline...however, there is no actual evidence that the two events are related." The traditional range of the herd is west of the pipeline corridor and the traditional calving area lies some 300-400 miles to the west.

As stated in the department publication, "it is now recognized that wolves alone can limit ungulate populations like moose, caribou and deer, in some situations...clearly, this is one of those situations...even without human harvest, wolves could take enough animals from this severely depressed

population that the herd could continue to decrease."

Those studying the caribou herd indicate that the present production of calves is normal but that survival of yearlings shows a high first-year mortality. Initial phases of an intensive range study indicate that range is probably not a limiting factor and that disease is not a

major factor in the decline. The report concludes "there is no known reason (with implementation of the regulations) for this herd not to grow a little larger each year...in time, the herd will grow to the point where it could once again support both human harvest and all the physical and cultural needs it satisfies." *



NOTE TO READERS

Fish Tales and Game Trails is distributed without charge to persons living in Alaska. Readers are invited to submit letters to the editor which deal with any phase of hunting, fishing, nature, conservation, or fish and game management and research. The Department of Fish and Game must be notified of address changes if the subscription is to be continued. Address changes, letters to the editor and requests for subscriptions should be addressed to:

Fish Tales-Game Trails
Department of Fish and Game
Support Bldg.
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Alaska

FISH *tales* & GAME *trails*

JANUARY - FEBRUARY 1977

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

