



HIS DARK BROWN fur knocking the morning dew off damp grass, a large Alaskan brown bear rambles down the bank to the water's edge. He peers up into the "photographic cave," a shallow indentation in a small bluff of gray puddingstone. Eight men, busy focusing their cameras, snap pictures of him. His brain catalogs the fact that the humans are in the same place as yesterday. Reassured by what is now an accepted pattern, he moves on to his favorite fishing spot. This scene was repeated many times last summer at the famed McNeil River falls on the Alaska Peninsula.

It is not known when the first brown bear discovered McNeil River and fished its calico-colored chum salmon as they returned from the Pacific Ocean to spawn. What is of immediate importance is the fact that in recent years, man has been making increasing use of the area.

Prior to the 1960s, a few persons came to the area each year in July to observe and photograph the more than 60 bears that fish the falls. In 1963, the Department of Fish and Game entered the area with a research program to gain

much-needed information on the giant bears. From then until 1972, department biologists used dart guns to immobilize approximately 60 bears and then marked them with tattoos, ear tags, and, in a few cases, color-coded collars.

However, at the same time the department was studying the bears, public use of the area began to grow by leaps and bounds and in 1965 the Alaska Legislature established the McNeil River Bear Sanctuary.

Photographers seeking wild bears objected to the harlequin-like aspect of marked bears. In 1971, the department began removing the conspicuous collars. In 1972, the department officially phased out the life history research program and decided that henceforth observation and photography would be the primary human use of the McNeil area. The program had served well in providing the base of information for more extensive studies elsewhere on the Alaska Peninsula.

Public use of the McNeil River area reached such magnitude that human activities and concentrations

began to force bears away from the falls. In the spring of 1973, the department approached the Board of Fish and Game with a proposal to regulate public use of the sanctuary. In the discussions that followed, the board decided that the primary management objective for McNeil River would be the preservation of this unique brown bear concentration; public and scientific use of the sanctuary would have to be compatible with that objective. The board adopted regulations designed to curtail human activity in a manner that would be beneficial to bears.

The permit system was introduced last July. In general, the system seemed to meet with enthusiastic acceptance by the public. Many persons expressed the opinion that viewing of such a spectacular concentration of bears should be considered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. They would rather have missed the chance entirely than to have seen the bear concentration reduced by excessive public use.

The summer was not without its problems. Many photographers

# MCNEIL RIVER

## It's for the bears

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came unprepared for weather and camping conditions. The McNeil River Sanctuary, which may be reached by air charter from Homer, Anchorage or King Salmon, is being managed as a wilderness experience and developments for the comfort of visitors are minimal. No cabins exist for public use, and unless preparations are carefully made, tent camping in a driving rainstorm can be a miserable experience. The trail to the falls is not the well-developed path found in most National Parks, but a simple bear trail with the worst brush cleared

away. Hip boots are necessary to wade the lagoon between the campground and the start of the trail. Wading the lagoon in hiking boots is a cold way to start the day, and spending the remainder of the day in damp clothes can certainly mar the experience of observing the bears. Some parties did not bring adequate food for a few extra days. When bad weather arrived and their aircraft did not, these persons were forced to rely upon food supplies of others. Fortunately, the camaraderie of these camps was such that this problem was

"weathered" by all parties in good spirits. The most frequently voiced complaint was, "I've run out of film!"

Exactly what the future holds for the McNeil River brown bear population is a matter for speculation. Existing regulations may have to be changed as demands on the resources in the sanctuary and surrounding area change. However, the State of Alaska has made a firm commitment that this unique concentration of brown bears shall remain for the enjoyment of this and future generations. ■

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